

“On Time, In Time and With Time:
The Symbol of Matzah and Its Meaning in Our Lives”

I.

This derashah will be over in less time than it takes flour and water to turn into hametz, which, according to the Talmud Yerushalmi, is 72 minutes. So start your stopwatches :)

Why do we eat matzah on Pesah?

The Haggadah itself asks and answers this very question in SOURCE 1 in the large central paragraph:

הגדה של פסח – מגיד

מצה זו שאנו אוכלין על שום מה. על שום שלא הספיק בצקם של אבותינו להחמיץ עד שנגלה עליהם מלך מלכי המלכים הקדוש ברוך הוא וגאלם מיד. שנאמר (שמות י"ב) ויאפו את הבצק אשר הוציאו ממצרים עגות מצות כי לא חמץ כי גורשו ממצרים ולא יכלו להתמהמה וגם צדה לא עשו להם.

Why do we eat matzah? Because on the night of the Exodus our ancestors had matzah - almost by accident. And presumably it was so unique, or captured something so central to the Exodus experience, that when we recall and recount that experience, we relive it in some way by eating the special food they ate.

Something strange goes on in this passage, however, that we can only understand by comparing it to the text about its neighboring symbols in this passage of the Haggadah, pesah -- that is, the korban pesah, the paschal lamb -- and maror.

Each of these two symbols is explained in the following format: This item – על שום מה? For what sake does it come? Because some agent (God, or the Egyptians) performed an act in the verb form of the noun in question to our ancestors in Egypt, as it says, and then we quote a verse that includes that verb again in it.

Pesach because God pasached (passed over) our ancestors' houses in Egypt, as it says, God pasached our ancestors' houses in Egypt.

Maror because the Egyptians merru (embittered) our ancestors' lives in Egypt, as it says, the Egyptians merru our ancestors' lives in Egypt.

Matzah, which is sandwiched in between, is not quite the same. Our ancestors are mentioned, a verse with the word matzah is quoted, but the play on words is missing, and, frankly, so is the subject. It doesn't say, Matzah because God matzahed our ancestors' dough, as it says, and God matzahed our ancestors' dough.

Something in this symbol doesn't line up. There is no agent of the 'matzah-ing', and there is no 'matzah-ing'..

This inconsistency – and the beginning of its answer – is highlighted when we look at the bare-bones version of this text in its original source, the Mishnah in the 10th Chapter of Pesahim. Remember that the Haggadah is built upon the framework of the Mishnah in the 10th Chapter of Pesahim, so this is the basis off of which the text in SOURCE 1 develops. Here it is, then, the original version, in SOURCE 2:

משנה מסכת פסחים פרק י

רבן גמליאל היה אומר כל שלא אמר שלשה דברים אלו בפסח לא יצא ידי חובתו ואלו הן פסח מצה ומרור
פסח על שום שפסח המקום על בתי אבותינו במצרים
מצה על שום שנגאלו אבותינו במצרים
מרור על שום שמררו המצריים את חיי אבותינו במצרים

Look how they line up on the Hebrew side. Same beginning, same end. But instead of a subject and a word play, the meaning of matzah is, simply, redemption. And even more perplexing than SOURCE 1, there is, at face value, no connection to matzah here at all. In the Haggadah, the explanation at least told a story about matzah.

“Matzah, because our ancestors were redeemed in Egypt”, is all the Mishnah says. *How? How does the matzah symbolize that redemption? And why is it different from its neighbors, pesah and marror?*

The famous answer to this question is the one the Haggadah does give back in SOURCE 1.

The dough didn't even have time to rise, we were rushed out of Egypt so fast, and so when we baked it, that matzah, emblematic of עין כהרף עין, God's blink-of-an-eye salvation of the Jewish people, became the symbol of our redemption.

This is the story we know. It is here in this verse, it is repeated elsewhere in the Torah in Devarim, and it is compelling. The haste, the energy, the immediacy of the redemption is all captured in that flatbread. As we eat it, we can close our eyes and be transported to the time when perhaps the starkest indication that we were really going free was that our dietary staple, our bread, was suddenly not its usual self. That's how fast and radical the change was.

But is that the whole story of the origin of matzah? Is it a remembrance of the haste of the redemption, and that's all? Is that a potent enough moment to warrant this symbol which is identified more strongly with Pesah, and is more halakhically central, than anything else?

In addition to this question of whether the classical answer is a sufficiently satisfying explanation for such a powerful symbol, there are textual and historical problems with this explanation as the origin of matzah. R Yitzhak Mirsky, in his beautiful sefer Hegyonei Halakhah, unpacks some of the difficulty with this approach.

To understand it, let us remind ourselves of the contents of Shemot Chapter 12, the Exodus story.

God summons Moshe and tells him to tell Bnei Yisrael all about the preparations for the Passover sacrifice -- the pesah -- they will offer a few days hence on the night of the plague upon the Egyptian firstborn and the Israelites' subsequent Exodus, and then God adds a brief summary of the 7 day holiday that will be observed for the

generations. Bnei Yisrael carry out these instructions, and after midnight they are sent forth from Egypt, taking with them the dough that did not have a chance to rise.

Now, as we see in SOURCE 3, already included in God's instructions to Moshe, long before the departure from Egypt, are these verses:

שמות פרק יב

(יד) וְהָיָה הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה לָכֶם לְזִכְרוֹן וְחֻגְתֶּם אֹתוֹ חֵג לִיקוּק לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם חֻקַּת עוֹלָם תִּחְגְּגוּהוּ:

(טו) שִׁבְעַת יָמִים מִצוֹת תֹּאכְלוּ אֶךְ בַּיּוֹם הָרִאשׁוֹן תִּשְׁבִּיתוּ שָׂאֵר מִבֵּיתֵיכֶם כִּי כָּל אֲכָל חֻמֶץ וְנִכְרְתָה הַנֶּפֶשׁ הַהוּא מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל מִיּוֹם הָרִאשׁוֹן עַד יוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי: ...

(יט) שִׁבְעַת יָמִים שָׂאֵר לֹא יִמָּצָא בְּבֵיתֵיכֶם כִּי כָּל אֲכָל מִחֻמֶּצֶת וְנִכְרְתָה הַנֶּפֶשׁ הַהוּא מֵעֵדֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּגֵר וּבְאֶזְרַח הָאָרֶץ:

(כ) כָּל מִחֻמֶּצֶת לֹא תֹאכְלוּ בְּכֹל מוֹשְׁבֵיתֵיכֶם תֹּאכְלוּ מִצוֹת: פ

So Bnei Yisrael have already been commanded about matzah! So why is the Haggadah telling us that we eat matzah on account of the dough which didn't have a chance to rise? That came later, when they were departing from Egypt!

Indeed, the Ramban implicitly asks this question in his subtle reordering and interpreting our proof text pasuk for why we eat matzah from Shemot 12:39 (you can look back at the pasuk in SOURCE 1) in SOURCE 4:

רמב"ן שמות פרשת בא פרק יב פסוק לט

(לט) וטעם ויאפו את הבצק - שאפו אותו מצות מפני המצוה שנצטוו שאור לא ימצא בבתיכם כי כל אוכל מחמצת ונכרתה. ואמר כי גורשו ממצרים, לומר שאפו אותו בדרך בעבור כי גורשו ממצרים ולא יכלו להתמהמה לאפות אותו בעיר ולשאת אותו אפוי מצות, ועל כן נשאו אותו בצק ומשארותם צרות בשמלותם על שכמם, ומהרו ואפו אותו טרם יחמץ בדרך או בסכות, כשבאו שם לשעה קלה כדברי רבותינו (מכילתא כאן):

Why did they bake the dough, asks the Ramban? Because they were prohibited from having hametz, as they had been told in v. 19 – they could not have any hametz in their household. That's why they had matzah. But then what's the relevance of the being hurried out of Egypt? For the Ramban, that's not why they baked matzah. It's why they baked the matzah *later*, on the way.

The matzah was not a sudden, new consequence of being driven out of Egypt. The matzah was not an unintentional byproduct of the Exodus that we now commemorate. It was already planned because of the prohibition of hametz! עוגות מצות כי לא חמץ – because they were not allowed to be hametz! For the Ramban, the hurry just meant that Bnei Yisrael was so hurried that they didn't even get to bake it before departing Egypt.

By the way, note here that however long this dough rose before baking it as hametz, the time it took them to gather their belongings and get out of town and get to the next destination outside of Egypt where they could bake, not to mention however long it had been rising before dinner that night – was that more or less than 18 minutes? Yes,

pretty indisputably way, way more than 18 minutes. But it was still matzah, not hametz. We'll say more about this time horizon later.

So for the Ramban, we eat matzah on Pesah for some other reason - whatever the reason we were commanded to have it in the first place. We still don't know what that was. And the hurry to leave is secondary. It's incidental to the matzah, which was intended to be baked as matzah regardless of how quickly or slowly we left Egypt.

So we return to our question – why were we commanded to eat matzah on Pesah?

The Abarbanel offers a novel answer that addresses this hole in the Ramban's explanation, *and turns us to a deeper understanding of matzah*, in SOURCE 5:

אברבנאל דברים פרק טז

אבל התשובה בזה הוא שהש"י צופה ומביט הדברי' שהיו קודם היותם. ורצה להראות את ישראל יציאתם ממצרי' שיהיה במהירות מופלא וכדי שהם ירגישו בדבר ויתנו אליו לב לכן צוה אליהם קודם היציאה שלא יאכלו חמץ כ"א מצה וכאשר באה עליהם מהירות היציאה היו מתחלחלים כלם על לחמם שלא יחמץ מפני הצווי הא-להי שכבר קדם אליהם. וכאשר יצאו וראו שלא הספיק בצקם להחמיץ ושגם עם יציאתם אפו את הבצק אשר הוציאו ממצרים עוגות מצות הכירו וידעו מהירות גאולתם ויציאתם כמה היא. הנה התבאר לך שהית' מצות המצה אשר נאמרה להם במצרים סבה לשהכירו מהירות יציאתם שהיה הנס הגדול. וצדקו אם כן דברי בעל ההגדה בטעם המצה שהוא מפני שלא הספיק בצקם של אבותינו להחמיץ ושקדם הצווי לפועל הנס. כדי שירגישו ויכירו וגו'.

In other words, *God commanded that the Exodus be observed with matzah instead of hametz so that we would notice and be attentive to the passage of time*. Because matzah becomes hametz after the dough rises, the commandment not to eat hametz essentially required that Bnei Yisrael constantly be aware of the passage of time, so as to ensure that their dough was not reaching that point.

Having a mitzvah to observe that draws our attention to the passage of time enabled us to notice how speedily we had gotten out of Egypt and what a miracle that was. That speed, says the Abarbanel, was in itself the great miracle.

The Abarbanel's point, I believe, then, is that God created – or used – the notion, the mitzvah of matzah in order to heighten our awareness of the miracle of the Exodus. That it happened at all is amazing. That it happened fast is absolutely stunning.

And the byproduct is that matzah then becomes a symbol of consciousness of passage, or non-passage, of time.

Why do we eat matzah on Pesah? Because we were commanded to do so all along in order to notice the speed of the redemption.

Matzah is a symbol of redemption because it is a symbol of paying attention to time.

We can demonstrate this further by tying up one important loose end. Until now, we have seen the Ramban argue that the reason for matzah cannot merely be that it was baked hastily upon our Exodus, because God had already commanded that we not eat hametz at the time of the Exodus before that hasty baking time came.

We have understood the Abarbanel's resolution, that in fact the reason God commanded that we not eat hametz at the time of the Exodus was so that the only food we would be preparing at the time of the Exodus would be matzah, and we would bake our matzah hastily and thereby be attuned to the pace of the redemption.

But all of this overlooks the fact that there is an entirely other matzah narrative. We have already laid eyes on this matzah, but have not sufficiently addressed it.

This is the matzah described in SOURCE 3 in the first verse in that source – in Shemot 12:8 – as part of the korban Pesah. We weren't just already commanded about a seven day holiday with matzah and no hametz (as in v. 19). *We were already commanded to - and already did - eat matzah before we were redeemed!* Look back at SOURCE 3.

שמות פרק יב

(ח) וְאָכְלוּ אֶת הַבֶּצֶק בְּלִילָה הַזֶּה צְלִי אֵשׁ וּמִצּוֹת עַל מַרְרִים יֹאכְלֶהוּ:

There are two matzahs here – the matzah we ate with the Passover offering, and the matzah we baked after leaving Egypt.

And these two matzahs – the matzah of the korban Pesah ritual and then the one baked on the way out seem to be held up side by side in Devarim 16:3 in SOURCE 6:

דברים פרק טז פסוק ג

לֹא תֹאכַל עָלָיו חֶמֶץ שִׁבְעַת יָמִים תֹּאכַל עָלָיו מִצּוֹת לֶחֶם עֲנִי כִּי בְּחַפְזוֹן יֵצְאֶת מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לְמַעַן תִּזְכֹּר אֶת יוֹם צֵאתְךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם כָּל יְמֵי חַיֶּיךָ:

Ramban, who seemed dead set on the idea that the rushing wasn't the essence of the matzah, acknowledges here that there really are two things going on in matzah – in SOURCE 7:

רמב"ן דברים פרשת ראה פרק טז פסוק ב

ובאר בכאן דברים רבים. כי הזכיר במצה שתהיה לחם עני, להגיד כי צוה לזכור שיצאו בחפזון, והיא עני זכר כי היו במצרים בלחם צר ומים לחץ, והנה תרמוז לשני דברים, וכן אמרו הא לחמא עניא די אכלו אבהתנא בארעא דמצרים.

Look at the Ramban's point! There are two matzahs in the haggadah, too – the *לחמא עניא* and the *מצה זו שאנו אוכלין*. Many subsequent Torah scholars further developed this distinction between matzah as *lechem oni*, as poor man's bread, and matzah as the matzah of the miracle of the redemption.

The Abarbanel, in his Haggadah, further demonstrated it in SOURCE 8:

הגדת זבח פסח לאברבנאל ד"ה מצה הדרך השלישית

"מצה זו שאנו אוכלים על שום מה?" ביקש בדה רבן גמליאל לברר מהו הטעם לאכילת מצה בזמן הזה, אם הוא על שום לחם עוני, או על שום הגאולה והחפזון? ומשיב, שהמצה שאנו אוכלים בזמן הזה, על שום שלא הספיק בצקת אבותינו להחמיץ, היינו על שום הגאולה. ולפי זה המצה שנצטוו בפרשת החודש לאכול במצרים לא היתה על שם העתיד אלא זכר לעצמה היתה ולשעתה היתה, זכר לעוני ולעבודת שנתענו במצרים.

We can now grasp something more about matzah by a close reading of these two references to matzah – these two different matzot – that essentially mark the opening and the closing of the Maggid section.

The *די אכלו אבהתנא בארעא דמצרים* – as a symbol of what our ancestors ate – refers to this matzah as a symbolic closing meal of their servitude in Egypt. It was a poor person's bread.

By the time we reach the end of the Maggid section, we ask not about the matzah *they* ate, but about this matzah *we* are eating. Our matzah is a sign of the speedy redemption they underwent moments after eating their last bites of poor person's bread.

The same matzah we eat today at the seder becomes somehow a merger of the two matzot eaten in fairly close succession on the night of the original Exodus, and what gives it its two different symbolisms? *The passage of time.*

Matzah, perhaps because it is so unchanging that it can sit in its box for years without becoming moldy or stale, draws our attention to how the reality around it, and thus its symbolic meaning, can change with time.

The crossing that threshold, in the middle of the night, from slavery to freedom, enabled the matzah to become something different entirely. The matzah of affliction became the matzah of redemption.

So why do we eat matzah today? Is it because we rushed out of Egypt as the plain sense of the verse seems to say? Or were we commanded to bake matzahs so we would notice time and have awareness and appreciation of the speed with which we departed, as Abarbanel says? Or is it because of some other reason, and the rushing was incidental, as Ramban says? And what is that reason?

Yes. And, we don't fully know yet. But we know we are meant to be sensitive to time.

This time consciousness is what matzah symbolizes in the first order.

In fact, time consciousness is what all of Pesah symbolizes. And it is a core message of Torah and of Judaism.

II.

So before I delve into a deeper argument about how the halakhic definition of matzah is about recognition of time, I want to situate matzah in a greater context of Pesah as a holiday all about time.

Our hagim all have different themes. On the hag, we live that theme intensely, and the goal is for that intense awareness and immersion in the theme to spill over into the rest of the year.

Pesah has many themes - freedom, nationhood, and miracles - but I want to argue that one of its central themes, beyond just the symbol of the matzah, is awareness of time and our relationship to time and the tensions that inhere within that.

If we pause for a moment, we will realize that the 14th-15th of Nisan is suffused, way more than any other day of the entire year, with attention to time.

On Erev Pesah, we suddenly become aware of halakhic times, of “zmanim”, that we never pay attention to the rest of the year.

Have you, on any day of the year, needed to know when we reach the end of the 5th halakhic hour of the day?

On Erev Pesah, it marks the deadline after which we may no longer benefit from hametz. If we didn't sell our hametz by then, when the clock ticks over to 11:52am, we are suddenly violating a Biblical prohibition not to have any hametz in our possession.

We start watching the clock from the night before for when we search for hametz, and that morning to know when we have to stop eating, and then owning, hametz.

And then comes hatzot hayom – halakhic midday. There is no other day of the year (other than perhaps Tishah B'Av) where midday carries so much significance, even though we are less attuned to it now. The first Mishnah in the 4th chapter of Pesahim records the custom to refrain from melakhah, from all unnecessary labor, from midday on Erev Pesah, since that afternoon we already began to offer the korban Pesah, and we want to be focused on that as its time draws near. Even in the absence of that korban today, the yom tov feeling is meant to descend upon us at hatzot, at halakhic midday.

While it's probably hard to imagine not doing any melakhah starting around 12:57pm on Monday afternoon, there are echoes of this minhag still today, including the halakhic preference to do our haircuts, shaving, and nail clipping by midday on Erev Pesah. And hey, if you can finish all your preparations and just sit back and spiritually prepare for the seder for the last 6.5 hours of Erev Pesah, go for it!

That's not all! The 10th chapter of Pesahim, that deals with the laws and procedures of the seder, begins with the injunction that we stop eating anything substantive around Minhah time in order to enter the seder night with a full appetite.

And come the seder itself, while in many homes once we truly get going we forget about what time it is for hours on end, there is also the awareness that the afikoman, a remembrance of the korban Pesah, is to be eaten before hatzot, before halakhic midnight, just as the korban Pesah was to be concluded by that time when the Temple stood.

There is no day in the calendar year with this many novel timepoints. The end of the 4th hour, the end of the 5th hour, the end of the 6th hour, Minhah time, nightfall, and halakhic midnight all carry extra halakhic importance - and we have to notice them - on Erev Pesah and Pesah night.

To heighten our awareness of time. To remind us that every minute counts. To drive home the awareness that even though these time points may feel at some level arbitrary – our halakhic reality makes them real. Makes the hametz in your possession – or in your mouth – completely fine one minute, and Biblically prohibited the next. Makes your Erev Pesah haircut a preparation for yom tov one minute before midday, and a disruption of yom tov the minute after.

Pesah focuses us on time – on deadlines and dividing lines.

Of course this is appropriate because the entire concept of our becoming a nation, and of our becoming free people, is based in our relationship to time.

The slave is subjugated to someone else's schedule, someone else's calendar.

The free person makes their own decisions about how to manage their time.

And so the first mitzvah we receive as a nation is the mitzvah of counting time. The first mitzvah we receive as a nation is "Hachodesh hazeh lachem rosh chodashim." A mitzvah about observing the new moons and marking time accordingly. The first thing the Jewish nation must do is create a Jewish calendar. The establishment of a new calendar has been a centerpiece of many revolutionary movements. This fact reflects how much being in control of time is central to freedom and self-sovereignty.

The Seforno articulates it perhaps most powerfully and most succinctly SOURCE 9:

ספורנו שמות פרק יב פסוק ב

(ב) החדש הזה לכם ראש חדשים. מכאן ואילך יהיו החדשים שלכם, לעשות בהם כרצונכם, אבל בימי השעבוד לא היו ימיכם שלכם, אבל היו לעבודת אחרים ורצונם, לפיכך ראשון הוא לכם לחדשי השנה. כי בו התחיל מציאותכם הבחירי:

So Pesach is all about attention to time. Awareness of time. The fact that time creates new realities. The fact that time is the distinguishing marker between slavery and freedom.

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With this in mind, we can now appreciate two critical lessons about how we manage time in our lives that the framework of Pesach – not just matzah – highlights. Then we will return to the matzah for a final, third, teaching about time, before our time is up.

The first lesson about time from the broader theme of Pesah is about the imprecision of human time, in contrast with divine time, and the consequent idea that we must endeavor, to the extent we can, and within human limitations, to make time sacred and to ever more closely try to treat time as God does.

Remember how we said we must be careful and precise about time with all of those halakhic zemanim? How the exact times matter and transform something from prohibited to permitted and vice versa? *Well, it's actually*

*impossible for us to do that!* We learn that lesson from the story of Pesah, as in SOURCE 10. The source here compares when God executes the plague of the firstborn, at exact midnight, to when Moshe tells Pharaoh that God has said about when that plague will occur, which is “around” midnight:

פסיקתא רבתי (איש שלום) הוספה א פיסקא ב - ויהי בחצי הלילה

דבר אחר ויהי בחצי הלילה ובמקום אחר כתוב ויאמר משה כה אמר ה' כחצות הלילה (שמות י"א ד'), מהו כן, אלא משה ע"י שהוא בשר ודם ואין בו"ד =בשר ודם= יכול לחלוק את הלילה לפיכך הוא אומר כחצות הלילה בחסר ויתיר, אבל הקדוש ברוך הוא שברא את הלילה הוא יודע עתיו ורגעיו לפיכך (כך) הוא חלקו כראוי, הוי ויהי בחצי הלילה.

One of the features of being a person, for Hazal, is an inherent imprecision, imperfection, particularly in the realm of time. God is exact; we are approximators.

I try using this as an excuse for why I am always late - humans just can't get the time exactly right. But that doesn't usually convince people :)

But there is a deeper message here. *We are not in control of time.*

This seems to emerge from the idea that God created the world, and its natural order, and that time is a component of nature, and we can only try to measure time. We don't create time, and therefore we cannot fully measure – or master – time.

This is simultaneously one of the most frustrating, and then relieving, and then ultimately challenging parts of life.

I can't create time.

So, on the one hand, I can't get too stressed out about it. I can only do the best I can in the time I have.

But, on the other hand, that's a serious demand – it requires continual choices about prioritizing and managing time, so that I actually am doing the best I can in the time that I have.

I think this concept, which we could spend hours and hours talking about is expressed powerfully in a subtle nuance of the English language.

When we describe having enjoyed an activity or an experience, and someone asks, “how was it?”, we say we had “a good time”, or “a meaningful time”.. What does that mean? Why don't we say that we had a good, or meaningful, *experience*? The word time here is a little bit superfluous - or inaccurate - on the face of it.

But of course, it's not. Time creeps into our description of life as a testament to our awareness that our most precious commodity is time. So when we say we had a good time, we mean that we think it was a good way to spend our time. Or a meaningful way.

Whatever we are doing, we are making a decision about how to spend our time. Because we only spend time, we don't create it. The closest we come is choosing thoughtfully how we allocate our time, which we often call “making time” for something. But the reality is that we don't make time. Only God does.

It is Rashi on the completion of Creation who quotes the Midrash that drives this point home most powerfully. SOURCE 11:

בראשית רבה (וילנא) פרשת בראשית פרשה י

אר"ש בן יוחאי בשר ודם שאינו יודע לא עתיו ולא רגעיו ולא שעותיו, הוא מוסיף מחול על הקודש, אבל הקדוש ברוך הוא שהוא יודע רגעיו ועתיו ושעותיו, נכנס בו כחוט השערה,

There is a parallel here between the centrality of time in the creation of the world and the creation of the Jewish nation. God achieves them with precise perfection. We cannot. It is incumbent upon us, as we approach time, both to be aware of our limitations, and להוסיף מחול על הקדש – to add holiness into the profane in the world of time. To infuse our time with holiness and to make the most of it.

Interestingly, this parallel -- between how we respond to human imprecision in time in the Creation of the world with Shabbat, and the formation of the Jewish nation on the night of the Exodus -- the parallel runs a little deeper.

How do we add holiness to the profane on a weekly basis? We light Shabbat candles earlier than sunset. How many minutes earlier? Yes, 18.

And how do we mark our freedom as a nation? We eat matzahs. Which take how many minutes to prepare? Yes, 18.

I believe this is not coincidental. Rabbi Dr. Abraham Joshua Heschel's masterful essay "The Sabbath" demonstrates how sanctity of time is central to the meaning of the Jewish observance of Shabbat. In this sense, Pesah is like Shabbat on steroids. We become hyper-sensitized to the sacredness of time. If Shabbat is about appreciation of time, sacred time, and the distinction between divine and human time, Pesah is that much more so.

This is the first tension in time that Pesah brings up.

Between exacting halakhic times and maximal time awareness, and human imperfections and lack of control. And the lesson that we must be aware of this reality, and also strive to be as divine as we can with our time, while fully accepting and owning that we are human.

The second lesson, also from the broader context of Pesah, has to do with another tension in time: the tension between being present in the moment and aware of time on the one hand, and achieving a state of "flow" and losing track of time on the other.

The moment we find ourselves in at the seder is such a prepared for, specific moment. We have crossed all the thresholds of the previous 24 hours of time-specified preparations and dividing lines, we have arrived at the seder night, and the importance of this specifically chosen moment is driven home by the midrash in the Haggadah that we remember well:

יכול מראש חדש. תלמוד לומר ביום ההוא. אי ביום ההוא יכול מבעוד יום. תלמוד לומר בעבור זה. בעבור זה לא אמרתי אלא בשעה שמצה ומרור מונחים לפניך.

Here the Haggadah emphasizes to us that there is a time for everything. There is a specific moment that is ripe for this discussion about the Exodus. The moment depends on reaching a certain time, and creating a certain environment.

Being aware of the time we are in, and paying attention to that time, is so much of what the seder night is about. And is so much of what it teaches us for life and for Jewish living.

And on the other hand, we encounter at the heart of modeling the Seder experience the story of the five sages observing the seder night in Bnei Brak. They were so immersed in the story כל אותו הלילה, that whole night, that they lost track of time until their students told them, הגיע זמן קריאת שמע של שחרית, the time for the morning Shema has come. They bumped into a deadline – they went from being aware of the moment, to in the moment, to losing track of time, to again being reminded of the time guidelines that our tradition places upon us.

This, too, is such a challenge. *How do we lead religious lives – and personal lives, that are vigilant about our obligations to be with people in certain places at certain times, to be involved in duties and responsibilities that are timebound, and at the same time to become carried away and so fully in a moment that we lose track of time?*

There is some happy medium out there to be achieved, a very difficult one to say the least, where we are sufficiently attuned to time that we have an awareness and appreciation of its gifts, and yet also not so attuned to time that we're unable to actually enjoy the things that are happening in time.

I think the story of the chachamim in Bnei Brak gives a little sense of how this might happen -- by punctuating life, as Judaism does, with meaningful markers of time that constantly pull us back into an awareness of time, so that we can't get too carried away, but give us pockets and moments of time in which we can get so engrossed in our work, or in our Torah, or in our seder, or in our family, that, for a moment we can let go of time.

We often speak of striving to "be in the moment," and often, this is meant in the sense of letting go of any awareness of time. But that's not quite what the words mean. Being *in* the moment means also being aware of the preciousness of the moment. It means being *in* time, not beyond or outside of time. So I think this sense of being in the moment is what Pesah helps us appreciate.

This, then, is the second lesson about time that Pesah teaches. The balance between being dutiful to our time-bound religious and human obligations on the one hand, and being freed up to be lost in the moment or experience, on the other hand.

Both lessons are lessons that emerge from classic tensions about time, and an effort to find a balance between them.

And there are many more such moments and tensions throughout the Haggadah. I encourage you this year, at one of your sedarim, to read the haggadah and participate in the ritual and examine the symbols with your mind especially attuned to the theme of time, and to consider, in turn, the role that time plays in our personal, national, religious and human lives.

To be aware of time and its critical role in our lives and yet recognize that we are not in control of it.

To aim to be fully conscious of time, but also to lose ourselves in it. But only to be drawn back in again.

III.

And so, in the context of the holiday of attention to time, we return to the matzah, the ultimate ritual symbol that draws our attention to time for a third and final lesson about time.

The third lesson, a lesson we will learn from the halakhot of baking matzah and the meaning of the word matzah, is the balance between *being driven by the pressure of finite time without being crushed by it, and how to include rest and regeneration in that balance.*

Think of a shofar, a lulav, a sukkah. None are defined by being what they are at a specific moment. By their position in time. A shofar is a shofar today and a shofar tomorrow. Not so for matzah.

Matzah, in dough form, is defined by time. It's only matzah for a limited time, and then the exact same thing becomes hametz. Matzah is about consciousness of time, and about the uncontrollable inexorable finitude of time. Of time limits.

Matzah is about trying to get something done in a limited time window. It's about knowing that there is a deadline, and trying to achieve the desired goal before the deadline.

*In some sense, that's what our entire lives are about – or maybe should be about. There is a deadline. It's hard to say this out loud, but it should be said. Because it is as true as it is sobering. The ultimate deadline is the literal one - the dead line. We don't know when it is coming. But it is out there.*

Some of us are more acutely aware of it than others, either because of our age, our nature, or our life experiences. For some of us, an awareness of time is unexpectedly forced upon us by illness or loss. And certainly tragic circumstances bring time into relief. The message of Pesah, though, is to cultivate this awareness without it being forced upon us by unexpected or tragic life circumstances.

The deadline is real for all of us. What are we trying to get done before that deadline?

A dear friend of mine in her 90s is dying. She keeps saying to me, "I have so much to do before I die, and I am not going to get it all done." What a powerful realization. And of course, it's true of all of us.

*And it's not just the ultimate dead line. It's wanting to be with a friend for the limited time they are in town. Or with a child for the limited time they are a child. Or have an experience in the window of time when we can appreciate it in the ways we want to. That can be an overwhelming pressure. And it's a pressure we should feel. It should animate us when we wake up in the morning!*

*We should rush! We should hurry!*

*But matzah is not just about rushing.*

Time is precious, but we can't live life in a full out sprint. And sometimes the fear of missing out – FOMO, as it is called today, causes us to miss out in other ways. The pressure of limited time can become its own worry, and keep us out of living life in real time.

How do we strike a balance?

The halakhot of baking matzah teach us a central lesson about how we live lives that are suffused with an awareness of time without driving ourselves crazy.

And remember, the point of this interpretation is not that matzah is good and hametz is bad. I think most of us would agree that our palates much prefer hametz to matzah! And there are many spiritual interpretation of these two states of dough that point out their various upsides and downsides.

My goal here is to suggest that matzah on Pesah is good, and hametz on Pesah is bad. And the only difference between them is time. And thus this symbol on Pesah draws our attention to the reality in life that the clock is ticking and that opportunities, and eras, and even life itself, they expire. And we want to ask what that means for us.

We want to ask how to live by the saying so appropriate for this season – אל תחמיצנה, מצוה הבאה לידיך, a mitzvah, an opportunity, a possibility for good that comes to your hand – don't miss it – don't let it become hametz!

So how do we keep things matzah – and prevent hametz, without becoming overwhelmed?

If I stopped and asked you the definition of hametz, I think you would tell me it is flour and water that have been mixed together for more than 18 minutes before they were baked.

And you'd be right. Kind of.

Of course, the Torah gives us no such definitions. We know very little about what these terms describe by looking into the psukim of the Torah. In fact, much of what we know of the definition of matzah and its relationship to hametz we learn from the Exodus story – from our very first verse in SOURCE 1 which tells us that Bnei Yisrael baked matzot which were not hametz because they were rushing out of Egypt and could not wait. From there we already know that the same thing which starts out as matzah, if left long enough, can become hametz.

But how long, and why, and how do we know?

There are a number of critical passages in the Gemara that work through this question, but for expediency's sake, we are going to look at how they all get combined into the halakhah about baking matzah, which is a good halakhah to learn and understand before Pesah especially since so few of us get to do this matzah baking ourselves (SOURCE 12):

שולחן ערוך אורח חיים הלכות פסח סימן תנט סעיף ב

לא יניחו העיסה בלא עסק ואפילו רגע אחד. וכל זמן שמתעסקים בו, אפילו כל היום אינו מחמיץ; ואם הניחו בלא עסק שיעור מיל, הוי חמץ. ושיעור מיל הוי רביעית שעה וחלק מעשרים מן השעה. הגה: ויש להחמיר למהר בענין עשיית המצות, כי יש לחוש שהשהיות יצטרפו לשיעור מיל, או שיהיה במקום חם שממהר להחמיץ (הגהות מיימוני פ"ה ומרדכי פרק אלו עוברין)...

So on the one hand, the dough is never supposed to remain idle, even for a moment.

On the other hand, as long as the dough is being worked, it *never* becomes hametz. You could knead and knead and knead all day long, and the dough would not become hametz.

Some curious Torah scholars recently conducted an experiment in which they mixed flour and water and a sourdough leavening starter. For the next six hours, one piece of the mixture was left alone in one bowl, and the same size piece was kneaded consistently with short breaks for those 6 hours. The dough that was kneaded consistently was much flatter and lesser in volume than the dough that was left alone. And when they were baked, the sourdough taste – the חימוץ – was much less perceptible in the dough that had been consistently worked.

So dough is never supposed to be idle.

And if it is never idle, it never becomes hametz.

So where does the 18 minutes come in? If it was left idle (which in principle is not supposed to happen) for more than 18 minutes, it becomes hametz. Less than 18 minutes, it would still be matzah when baked.

If matzah is the symbol of awareness of time, and in this framework hametz is the thing we want to avoid - it's the deadline, then I believe this is a basic message for us about the balanced way we should think about time.

We don't want to be idle. This is a basic value. If time passes and we have done nothing, we are stagnant.

On the other hand, we don't have to be afraid of some looming deadline as long as we are working. If we are עוסק בעיסה, working the dough, then we never become hametz. Being actively engaged in our project, even if we haven't finished, keeps it fresh and real.

This message is encapsulated in that classic dictum from Pirkei Avot: לא עליך המלאכה לגמור - It is not your responsibility, necessarily, to finish the task, but nor are you free to stop working on the task or busying yourself with the task. We must not le-hibitel, we must le-hitasek. But only in good and productive ways. Rushing to complete a task for the sake of completing it is not the right way to use time.

What this means to me is that we actually don't need to rush, or to feel crushed by time pressure, as long as we are working. In the journey of life, while of course there are deadlines, when we think more broadly about our life goals, we need not be so stressed. If we keep working at things, they do not become hametz.

But there is this middle essential point - the 18 minutes. There is room for a little bit of idleness in our lives. While the halakhah describes it as bediavad, not all the early sources do. Some simply state it as a fact. You have 18 minutes before dough that lays fallow and unworked becomes hametz. There is time to breathe, to be inactive, to let things rest, even when there is a deadline that looms.

Neuroscience research has shown more and more the value of this idleness. Just a few minutes here and there during the day in which we turn off our brains and do nothing is actually critical to successfully living productive and functional lives.

Our brains are in a completely different mode during that time, a mode only truly discovered and studied in the last 25 years of neuroscience, and a mode that cognitive psychologist Daniel Levitin calls “mind-wandering mode”. Our brains are consolidating, organizing, processing information and creating neural networks and connections in completely different ways during this mode, ways they can only do when we turn off “central executive mode” and let them be.

If we turned off our brains for too long, they would atrophy. Neuroscience teaches us this, too - that the brain operates on a use it or lose it basis. This is the epitome of the warning against being idle. If we don't work a certain skill, we will literally lose it. But at the same time, neuroscience requires this idleness and down time for the consolidation of the brain and the new skills.

So it is with our use of time. It's the model of matzah.

The goal is to be consistently active. That is the value and the model. And in fact, if we are, we never stagnate. There is always meaning as long as there is activity.

But there is also a need to pause, to breathe, to let the dough mix a little on its own.

We are blessed to live in a community that models this – with people who work hard and rest hard, those who chip away at long-term projects, whether learning Daf Yomi, or working on life-changing medical discoveries, or educating children. The time pressure drives them, but it does not paralyze them. And they know how to breathe along the way.

Matzah encompasses these two sometimes warring, but ultimately mutually reinforcing messages. We must keep at our life's work, and as long as we are working we are succeeding. And, at the same time, we must rest, pause, refresh.

Indeed, it's not surprising that these is a central message of the moment of the Exodus, because it is also the central message of the other pole of our relationship with God, the Creation of the world, which we have referenced earlier in that each of them reinforce God as creator of time. For there, too, the message is a drive of perpetual work alongside a regular pause - Shabbat.

IV.

*This very balance is rooted in the meaning of the words matzah.*

Remember מצה זו על שום מה in SOURCE 1?

We noticed that not like the word play on pesach or maror, the word play on matzah was missing, replaced the the word נגאלו.

What is the root of the words matzah?

Linguists are not sure, but two roots present themselves as their best guess.

The first is נצה, a root which means rushing, and struggling. This is one sense of matzah. It's the matzah that says לא יניחו העיסה בלא עסק ואפילו רגע אחד - you can't stop pushing and working, because there is a deadline. It's the sense of rush and drive that should animate us always.

The second is מצצ, which means squeezing, which is something entirely different. It's not about rushing. It's about persistent work. It's מחמיץ בו, אפילו כל היום אינו מחמיץ. You can take a break while squeezing something out and come back refreshed. And you probably never quite squeeze it all out. But you consistently, little by little, work at it.

*And matzah is both. It's the drive and the rush and feeling the pressure and the stopwatch. And it's pushing back against that to say, I'm on it. I can't let the pressure overwhelm me. I am journeying forward, catching my breath as I go.*

And holding both those senses of matzah is the route to redemption.

*So in SOURCE 2 in place of the word matzah, comes the word נגאלו. Because ultimately, matzah-ing, living life feeling the pressure but not getting overwhelmed, and pacing ourselves, and stopping to breathe, is the route to redemption.*

I believe it's precisely this balance that the Israelites were striking as they left Egypt and dove headlong into their freedom.

All this time, I've been wondering, *how did those liberated Israelites bake their matzot in time?* Yes, we feel the urgency of their rush, and of the Egyptians rushing them, but it can't be the case that they gathered up their things and got out and arrived at their next destination in 18 minutes.

Perhaps their halakhic definition of hametz was different. The Talmud Yerushalmi, as I said at the outset, seems to indicate that you have 72 minutes. Maybe other opinions thought you had even more.

*The answer, in my mind, is simple and midrashic: they were rushing, they were pressured, but they worked the dough along the way. I don't know if it was just bouncing along on their shoulders, or they paused as they went to keep kneading, but they were מתעסקים בו, working it, the whole way. As rushed as they were, they didn't panic. They kept working it, until they came to their destination where they could bake it.*

And the matzah, for them, symbolized, as the Abarbanel explained, awareness of the haste of God's redemption, but it also symbolized how to be in the universe of time. Conscious of time, pressured by time, but not enslaved by time. Alive in time. Working the journey, consistently, moving, with pauses to refresh and regroup along the way.

That is the path to geulah.

V.

It's the path of the clock of the Chozeh of Lublin. The clock, a non-descript clock, that was sold by the Chozeh's son to an innkeeper after his father died and the son fell on hard times.

Years later, the Saba Kadisha of Radoshitz, a student of the Chozeh, stayed in that that very room of the inn where that clock was.

He asked the innkeeper if it was the Chozeh's clock. The innkeeper hardly recalled, but then he thought back to the time the Chozeh's son had given it to him and remembered that in fact it was.

But how did you know, the innkeeper asked the Saba of Radoshitz? It looks like every other clock!

But it doesn't sound like every other clock, answered the Saba.

"A standard clock," he explained to the innkeeper, "strikes such a mournful tone. 'Another hour of your life has passed you by,' it says. 'You are now one hour closer to the grave.'

But this clock, the clock of the Chozeh, he who internalized the lessons of Matzah, the lessons of Pesach, this clock joyfully proclaims: 'Another hour has gone by. You used that hour! You are now one hour closer to the Redemption!'

May we internalize the messages of Pesah, the messages of matzah, and live on time, in time, and with time, and may we hear our clocks ticking us one step closer to redemption.

Hag kasher vesameah!