

The Meaning of Matza Shabbat HaGadol 5776

As the designated Darshan for this Shabbat I had a choice: shall I refer to Parashat Metzora and therefore speak about leprous skin, moldy walls and other grotesque and yucky intrusions into our lives and how these intrusions might inspire us to become better human beings? Or do I realize that this is Shabbat HaGadol, the Shabbat that precedes the week of Pesach, Z'man Cherutenu, the festival of our liberation, the Shabbat when rabbis of yore were expected to instruct the congregation in the ways of meticulous observance of the coming holiday, with special attention paid to what constitutes food that may be eaten and food that must be avoided during the seven (or eight) days of the holiday?

I opt for the latter but with less concern on patterns of observance than on the possible meaning, or rather meanings, of the one most notable food associated with the holiday, matza. My question: what is the meaning of matza? In responding, I do not pretend to exhaust the topic either in depth – and certainly not in **breadth** (pun) -- but merely to identify several categories, each of which could lend themselves to a far fuller discussion than what I will provide now.

As we read in the maftir reading last Shabbat: for the first Pesach celebration, the one that took place as the people of Israel prepared to high tail it out of Egypt, the direction issued forth [Exodus 12:8]: “They shall eat the flesh [of the slaughtered lamb] that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire, with unleavened bread [matza] and with bitter herbs.” Here we read the instruction to balance the first Pesach meal with a protein source, a carb, and a veggie. However, in the same chapter, when establishing future holiday observances, we find [12:14-15]: “This day shall be for you one of remembrance: you shall celebrate it as a festival to Adonai for all time. Seven days you shall eat matza; on the very first day remove leaven from your houses, for whoever eats leavened bread from the first day to the seventh day, that person shall be cut off from Israel.” That is to say, after the very first seder, matza emerges as the pre-eminent symbolic food, carbs without the balance of protein or veggies.

What is the meaning of matza? In the spirit of the four questions, cups of wine and children that populate our seders, I offer a fourfold response:

1) In approaching the holiday, even before we take the first bite of the dry delicacy, if we follow tradition's dictates, we first engage in *bedikat chametz* and *biur chametz*, searching for and ridding our homes of matza's opposite, the

undesirable leaven. What meaning might we make of this act? Alan Morinis, modern day teacher of Mussar, cites Rabbi Yerucham Levovitz of Mir who puts the question like this:

‘Why does *HaShem* care whether a Jew possesses a tiny morsel of *chametz* on Pesach?’ His answer is that God doesn’t really care about *chametz*. What God cares about is that we be awakened people so we are prepared to reflect on the Exodus from Egypt. The attention to detail in the search for *chametz* is meant to wake us up.

That is, whereas some people become quite bored by or even oppositional to the details of much ritual observance, from a certain point of view, attention to those very details could make one more attentive in general, more alert, more awake, more curious, and more in the state of mind and heart that would allow one to experience liberation from whatever binds and constricts one in a given year.

2) In the initial instructions to the Israelites, Moses orders them to move *B’Chipazon*, in haste. Thus, automatically matza conveys the notion of hurriedness, the speed required of ancestors on the run with little time to spare. The flat bread not given time to rise before contemporary bakers shove it into an oven reminds us that freedom sometimes requires an unnatural readiness to depart. In a similar vein, one notes that both the matza permitted during the holiday and the bread forbidden during the same period consist of nearly identical ingredients, mainly flour and water, possibly egg, salt, sugar, or fruit juice. Matza however may contain no yeast and after the water is added, the mixture may not stand for more than 18 minutes before baking. One might say then that the difference between fulfilling the mitzvah of matza and violating it depends entirely on timing, on punctuality. The lesson: procrastination in the performance of this mitzvah (perhaps we could generalize and say any mitzvah) undoes it.

A more general consideration of the theme of timing as applied to matza that could become chametz suggests the middah of *seder*/order. We order the meal of Pesach in terms of rituals and give it the name seder for that ordered quality. But the order that emerges from a consideration of timeliness and punctuality in the production of matza pertains more globally. A consideration of matza in this regard could impel us to contemplate the way we organize our time, the way we allocate the 168 hours we have to spend each week. Do I do the things I deem important with the 168 hours? Do I include activities that serve others, that reflect my better values and add to the joy and trust and wellbeing of others and those I love and my own? Or do I let myself stay in reactive mode, caught up in the ever-

present urgent matters but never getting to those I deem important, until the 168 have been entirely spent? Matza might impel us toward both punctuality and giving high priority to that which we deem important.

3) In regard to matza and chametz and the Pesach holiday, many commentators over the years associate yeast, and hence chametz in general, with arrogance. Yeast causes dough to puff up just as arrogance causes a person to puff up. As the commentator in *A Different Night* puts it [p. 15]:

Yeast is also a catalyst that symbolizes the restless force of the evil inclination (yetzer hara). Just as yeast causes fermentation in bread and wine, it also turns them sour when not controlled. Similarly, the instinctual forces, desire, and ambition, can contribute to progress but also to discontent and corruption....Don Isaac Abarbanel (15th c. Spain and Italy) explains that matza represents simplicity which is a desirable spiritual quality. Freedom involves the rejection of “the fleshpots of Egypt” (Exodus 16:3) and the removal of the restless yeast of the evil inclination.”

I would turn the statement associating chametz with the yetzer hara into a question: How could matza impel a consideration of our inclinations and how might we channel them toward admirable goals and resist the tendencies toward unhealthy or undesirable directions? Alan Morinis likens matza to medicine when he says:

The *Mussar* masters say that *matzah* is ... the bread that cures us. The rest of the year, we can eat all sorts of puffed up and rich pastries, but at *Pesach* we eat the bread that stirs up no *yetzer hara*, no exaggerated desire. For just this week, we step away from the habitual indulgences that can so easily come to rule over us. We learn great lessons from that forswearing, and it heals us spiritually. But we are not supposed to make a diet of medicine. A period of stepping back from the desires and cravings that twist and ensnare us is meant to restore our inner well-being so that we can return to the ordinary world, strengthened and refreshed. This is the gift of *matzah*....

4) Fourth and finally for now, we refer to matza as *Lechem Oni*, bread of impoverishment. Matza is poor bread in several senses. First, it reminds us of our lowly backgrounds, whether we mean by this the version that recalls our enslavement or the alternate version that recalls the idolatrous ways of our past. Either way, the symbol of lowly origins should deflate whatever tendencies we might have to grow too haughty. But, in addition, the symbol of lowly origins

serves to implant and cultivate within us an empathic relationship with all those who find themselves at the margins of society, vulnerable, oppressed, or in danger. The matza we now consume reminds us to reach out to the people who today find themselves at the margins.

During our seder meals, we observe the custom of *Yachatz* by breaking the middle matza. Again in the words of Alan Morinis:

When we break it in half, we call attention to its fragility. Like *matzah*, we ourselves are not so strong, not so great, not so bold.

Acknowledging our own limitations enhances our humility and thereby reduces the greatest obstacle to genuine spiritual liberation – being your own Pharaoh, caught in the trap of ego. We learn this from the broken *matzah*.

Or as Leonard Cohen put it [*Anthem*]: “There is a crack, a crack in everything; that’s how the light gets in.” This year, may the light that gets in help us grow in attentiveness, in timeliness, in humility, and in social conscience. May we be blessed with a light-filled and liberating Pesach.