

**Four Answers to the Question:
“Why Do We Eat Matzah?”
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Pesach (Passover) is just over two weeks away and, if you're like most American Jews, you're going to be celebrating it one way or another. More than 80% of American Jews attend a seder of one form or another.

Although there are many things that we do on Pesach which distinguish it from other days of the year, the quintessential thing that we do is to refrain from eating certain foods, and to go out of our way to eat other foods.

Some of the latter we eat only at the seder: food such as parsley, bitter herbs, or haroset.

But then there are foods that we eat throughout the holiday. And the quintessential example of such food is, of course, matzah.

Now the fact is that although we mustn't eat hametz (leavened products) throughout the entire holiday, there is a mitzvah (a religious obligation) to eat matzah only on the first days of the holiday. Nonetheless, the notion that one should eat matzah throughout the festival has persisted. Why is that?

The best way to address that question is to tackle a more fundamental one: Why do we eat matzah in the first place? What is the essence, if there is one (or two, or more), of the mitzvah to eat matzah on Pesach?

I am going to propose three answers to the question, “Why do we eat matzah?” And when I am finished, I'm going to give you a fourth one. You can decide which answer makes most sense to you.

The first answer to the question, “Why do we eat matzah?” is that matzah is “quick bread.” It is bread that we can make quickly, and so it reminds us of the flight from Egypt, which took place *b'hipazon* -- “in haste.”



How do we know that it's quick bread? Well, take a look at Genesis 18:6 (the story of Abraham feeding the angels) or Genesis 19:3 (Lot welcoming the same strangers into his home). In the first story (in which the word "matzah" doesn't explicitly appear), Abraham offers the angels "*pat lechem*" – a loaf of bread -- and tells Sarah to prepare "*ugot*" – cakes; in the second, Lot bakes "*matzot*." In both cases, very little time elapses between the decision to prepare the food and the meal, so it seems that we're speaking here of bread that is made by mixing flour and water together and quickly baking it.

Similarly, in Samuel II, the Woman of En-dor is described as quickly preparing a meal for Saul as follows: "The woman ... hastily slaughtered [a calf], and took flour and kneaded it, and baked some *matzot*. She set this before Saul and his courtiers, and they ate. Then they rose and left the same night." In his commentary to Deuteronomy, Jeffrey Tigay writes, "*Matsah* [is] bread made without yeast and not allowed to rise. **Since it can be made quickly, it was commonly prepared for unexpected guests.** It was probably similar to the flat unleavened bread that bedouins still bake on embers and that Arab peasants prepare for unexpected guests." (p. 154; emphasis added.)

In Exodus 12 (v.34) we're told that when the children of Israel left Egypt, they took their dough before it was leavened, "*vayisah ha-am et b'tzeko terem yehmatz* - - The people took their dough before it had risen or leavened" -- and we're then told in v. 39: "*Vayofu et ha-batzek asher hotziu mimitzrayim ugot matzot ki lo hametz, ki gorshu mimitzrayim v'lo yachlu l'hitmameah, v'gam tzedah lo asu lahem.*" – "They baked the dough which they had brought forth from Egypt into cakes of matzah, for it had not (yet) leavened, for they could not tarry, nor had they prepared for themselves any provisions." So it's not surprising that we have a tradition of eating matzah on Pesah, since it is associated with the flight from Egypt.

Matzah *is* in fact made in a hurry. If you've ever observed matzah baking, you know that from the moment that the water is mixed with the flour, everyone is rushing. Because matzah has to be made in just a short amount of time, lest the process of fermentation begin and cause the bread to rise.

Incidentally, Jews used to be much less anxious about it in former days than they are today. In the Talmud we're told that matzah must be made in the amount of time it takes to walk a Roman mile. (Pesachim 46a) Leaving aside the question of the length of a Roman mile (it's 2,000 cubits; about 3,000 feet), how long does it

take to walk it? Well, it used to be understood to take as long as 24 or 27 minutes. Nowadays, the halachic standard is 18 minutes. Incidentally, the water that is used to make the matzah has to be drawn and left standing overnight in order for it to become chilled. (See Orach Hayim 455:2: “*matzah she-lanu*”) The idea is to slow down the process of fermentation as much as possible.

So the first reason we eat matzah is that it is food made in a hurry. And it therefore reminds us of the flight from Egypt, which took place in a hurry.

But there’s another reason why we eat matzah. In the passage in Deuteronomy that describes the mitzvah of eating matzah on Pesach, two words are added after the word matzah appears. It’s as if the text is trying to explain a term that has become unknown or whose complete meaning has become unclear through time. In Deuteronomy chapter 16, after telling us that we shouldn’t eat *hametz*, leavened bread, with the paschal offering, the text tells us that we should eat matzot. Then it explains, as if to say, “i.e.,” “*lechem oni* – the bread of poverty, the bread of affliction,” or, in Jeffrey Tigay’s translation, “the bread of distress.”

In other words, matzah isn’t just the bread our ancestors ate on their journey out of the country. It’s “**poor man’s bread.**” It’s the bread that they ate throughout their enslavement. In other words, when we eat matzah we’re supposed to be empathizing with the **enslavement** of our ancestors, not celebrating their flight to freedom. [As Rashi puts it, “*lechem oni: lechem she-mazkir et ha-oni she-nitanu b’mitzrayim* – bread that recalls the affliction which [the Israelites] suffered in Egypt. “*Oni*” is a word commonly used to describe the enslavement in Egypt: see Exodus 3:7, 17; 4:31; Deut. 26:7, Neh. 9:9.]

There are hints of this meaning of Pesach in two passages in the seder that should be very familiar to all of us.

The first is the famous passage “*ha lachma anya*” that we recite at the beginning of the *maggid* section of the *haggadah*. We take off the matzah cover and lift up a piece and say, “This is the bread of affliction that our forefathers ate in the land of Egypt.” (*Lachma anya* is the Aramaic for *lechem oni*.) We then go on to ask the four questions. And you may have noticed that the four questions come in two pairs. They ask, first, about matzah and maror, and then next about dipping and leaning. It seems as though the first two, matzah and maror, are focusing on aspects of the evening that symbolize or that remind us of **slavery**, whereas the latter two, dipping and leaning, focus on aspects of the meal that exemplify **freedom**.

And the fact is that the only kind of matzah that may be eaten to fulfill the mitzvah of eating matzah at the seder is simple, plain, unseasoned matzah, because it is supposed to be *lechem oni*. You may be familiar with other kinds of matzah, such as egg matzah. Egg matzah is an example of what's called in Hebrew, *matzah ashirah*, or enriched matzah. Enriched matzah, made with eggs, often sweetened with fruit juices, has been known for millenia. And although the rabbis disagreed whether it could be eaten at all on Pesach, all agreed that it couldn't be eaten to fulfill the mitzvah of eating it at the seder, that the only kind of matzah that was permitted at that moment is simple, plain matzah.

The Karaites went even further than this. You may know that in late antiquity a sect of Jews arose called Karaites who interpreted the Bible more strictly than rabbinic Jews. They refused to interpret the Bible liberally as did the rabbis and therefore diverged from standard rabbinic practice. So when it came to matzah, ordinary matzah wasn't simple enough for them.

How could matzah be simpler than the matzah that we ordinarily eat? After all, what's in it? Only two ingredients: flour and water. Water, there's not much you can do with. But flour can come from one of a variety of grains. There are five grains mentioned in the Bible that are understood to have the potential to leaven, to become what we call hametz. And matzah can be made from any one of those grains, because in fact matzah can only be made from a substance that could potentially become hametz. Those grains are wheat, rye, oats, barley (*s'o'rim*) and spelt. (See Mishnah Pesachim 2:5)

The Karaites knew that of all these grains, barley was the cheapest. Barley in fact is a grain that you can feed to animals. And so they determined that only matzah made from barley could be eaten at the seder, for only barley matzah was truly *lechem oni*. [See II Kings 4:42 (the beginning of the *haftarah* for *Parashat Tazria*, which we would have recited this morning, had it not also been Shabbat HaHodesh), "*lechem s'orim*," or "barley bread."] Incidentally, I don't know where you can obtain barley matzah today, but those with wheat allergies can obtain matzahs made from rye or spelt. Anyone who's interested should see me after services.

So a second reason to eat matzah on Pesach – indeed the most reasonable reason why it would make sense for us to eat it for seven or eight full days – is not that it reminds us of the Israelites' hurried flight from slavery but rather because it reminds us of their enslavement.

There is yet a **third** reason to eat matzah on Pesach, a more homiletical one. The rabbis were puzzled: how could it be that food that is rather ordinary, that we eat most of the year, must be thoroughly removed from our homes during the week of the holiday? It must be because it represents something that is in all of us all the time, something that we may in fact not take notice of, something that, once a year it is helpful to do without. Just as, once a year, on Yom Kippur, we refrain from food altogether, at this season, six months later, we refrain from eating *hametz*. Why? What does *hametz* symbolize?

To the rabbis, *hametz* represented the *yetzer ha-rah*, the evil inclination (Berachot 17a) – that tendency within all of us to be ambitious, to strive to defeat others, to compete and to win, to conquer and to subdue.

According to the rabbis, the requirement to eat flat matzah on this, the holiday of freedom, symbolized the need to remove from our hearts all the pride, the egoism, the narcissism which puffs us up most of the year, and to recover our humility and our simplicity, in order to be fully free. In this way we can prepare, just as the Israelites did, to receive the Torah.

The Zohar calls matzah: *nahama illa'ah*, “Heavenly Bread”. Does it look like heaven to you? We, on the contrary, tend to associate rich desserts with heaven. But to the Zohar, *this* is true heaven.

Incidentally, for this reason, efforts have always been made to keep matzah flat. You may note that matzah has holes in it. That’s in order to keep it flat. Those holes traditionally were made by an implement known as a *reidl*, which was rolled over the dough. Now, machine made matzahs have the holes put in automatically.

Incidentally, matzahs never were as flat as they are today. In the Talmud, it says that matzahs shouldn’t be any thicker than four fingers. That’s pretty thick! Later the standard was changed to be only one finger. But still, that’s a lot thicker than your average matzah today.

And so the third reason to eat matzah is to be reminded of the need to be humble: to diminish ourselves, in order to achieve the truly important and spiritually significant goals in life.

The three reasons are, then, that matzah reminds us of our flight to freedom, it reminds us of our enslavement, and it reminds us of the perennial need to be humble.

But I can't conclude without mentioning a fourth reason, a reason that I think is significant to all of us who happen to live in the diaspora—that is, outside of the land of Israel.

And I think that those best able to appreciate this answer are the young people here today, those who attend schools where both Jewish as well as non-Jewish students can be found.

I happened to have gone to public schools in which there were many Jewish children, but also many non-Jewish children.

And I can remember very distinctly that odd feeling of bringing matzah sandwiches to school on Pesach. Not, of course on the first two days, when we all stayed home from school and went to services, nor on the last two days, when we did the same, but on the **intermediate** days of the festival. It seemed that every year, no matter how the spring vacation fell, there almost always was a day or two when we had school during Pesach – as will be the case this year. (There will be two days of school during the intermediate days of Passover, Thursday, April 17th and Friday, April 18th.)

I can remember that moment of truth when I pulled my lunch out of the lunchbox. I knew in my heart of hearts that to pull out a regular sandwich would be to deny who I was, in a fundamental way. To pull out matzah wasn't easy: it identified me, it made me stand out. It meant that I couldn't hide, I was out there for all to see. And yet it therefore was all the more powerful a symbol.

Nothing – not any other thing I did during the year, not any article of clothing I wore, nothing I said -- NOTHING so distinguished me as a Jew as that matzah sandwich. That act of eating matzah in public (as well as refraining from all those wonderful treats I ate every other week of the year: those hot Philadelphia soft pretzels that I would buy from an old man who sold them from a pushcart at the local subway station, and the popcorn and the pastries and the donuts and the muffins and the cupcakes that I so loved) -- **that act made me a Jew in the eyes of my classmates and, perhaps more importantly, in my own eyes.**

I'm sure I'm not alone. I'm sure I'm not the only one who has such an image in his or her mind of that moment of looking at matzah in public, and then sharing it with, and explaining it to, non-Jewish people.

Just the other day, I received a fascinating memoir written by the parent of a member of our congregation (and a relative of our bat mitzvah) who remembers being on a tiny tropical island in the Pacific sixty years ago, in 1954. For those of us who are too young to remember what went on in the middle of the Pacific in those days, let me just say that it was a time of top-secret military tests.

This gentleman was one of a group of civilians and enlisted men who were dropped off at a God-forsaken island in the middle of nowhere that had been leveled by an explosion, where they waited and waited and waited. It turns out that because of a foul-up, they were stranded there for quite a while, with no provisions.

As they sat there waiting to be picked up, they got hungry. Really hungry. There was nothing on this island, nothing at all. You get hungry in the tropics, particularly when you don't know when your next meal is coming. And the sun was hot and the hours just kept passing.

Finally, this gentleman remembered that in his satchel was a package from home. His mother had been sending him cookies; maybe that's what she had sent him this time.

He tore open the package and discovered not cookies but—you guessed it—a box of matzah. And to this day he remembers sharing those matzos with the non-Jewish airman with whom he was sharing that God-forsaken island, and telling them the story of Passover.

I hope that we will all stock up on matzah this year – this incredibly multi-valent Jewish food. I hope that, as the *halachah* requires, we'll eat it at the seder and thereby be reminded not only of the affliction of our people but also their redemption. I hope that we'll also reflect on how we can gain in humility and simplicity.

Finally, I hope that we'll eat that matzah with pride throughout the festival, “*b'shivteinu b'veiteinu, u'v'lechteinu ba-derekh*” – “at home and abroad,” night and day, wherever we happen to find ourselves, and I hope that we will share that

bread with others, and proudly and unabashedly share with them the story of the Exodus as well.

Shabbat Shalom and Hag Sameach!

NOTE: Many thanks to Martin Shapiro for sharing his wonderful recollection of eating matzos in the Marshall Islands in 1954, which appears below in its entirety:

3000 Years Later
(A Passover Story)
(Revised Version)
Martin Shapiro

It was spring of 1954. We were on a tropical island west of the International Date Line and 10 degrees north of the equator. This island and the others near it had a history of activity. In recent years, German agriculturalists had cultivated coconuts, and the Japanese used these islands to further their war efforts. Some of the bloodiest battles of World War II were fought here. Now these islands were the scene of another page in world history. They were covered with Americans conducting scientific tests. Civilian as well as military engineers and scientists with numerous people in supporting positions were engaged in a King Size experiment called "Operation Castle". This was the code name for the 1954 nuclear bomb test series, which took place in the Marshall Islands.

I was an engineer working for the Boston / Las Vegas firm of "Edgerton Germeshausen and Grier" better known as "EGG". We were under contract to the Atomic Energy Commission and the Department of Defense. I had been in the Marshalls long enough to have seen one of the most beautiful and at the same time, one of the most frightening sights that any man has ever seen. Some unfortunate Japanese fishermen had described this same sight as another sunrise.

I had watched this detonation from one of the more comfortable islands where I lived in a metal house on the ocean side of the island and shared a room with three other "EGG men". We ate well. Our cooks were mostly Hawaiians working for another firm also under contract with the Atomic Energy Commission. We had an excellent beach on the lagoon side of the island. The sand was soft and white and the water was warm and clear. Except for the fact that there were no females to share this with, the beach would rate as one of the finest in the world.

Most of the trees had been removed so that the trade winds could help cool the island at night after the brutally hot sun roasted each and every one of us during the day. The island was sprayed on a regular schedule to keep us free of insects. We had movies every night and various facilities to keep us comfortable. In general, this was considered to be “good living”.

Some of our people were not as fortunate. They worked on islands that lacked many facilities. They lived in tents or aboard ships. Trees blocked the trade winds. Flies swarmed about in dense black clouds. Lunch was frequently dry sandwiches or K rations. The beaches were loaded with sharks.

The time came for me to relieve someone on one of the less desirable locations. I knew the routine, having been through it once before. I was to take a small boat over to another island the following morning and there I would take an airplane to still another island where I would be transferred to a ship by helicopter. I had a lot of last minute work to do besides my packing. To help complicate matters, my mail was especially heavy that evening, including several letters and a package from my parents. I didn't have time to open the package so I packed it with my clothes.

(2)

On other nights the splashing waves, the rain on the metal roof or the sound of the winds would put me to sleep. That night I fell asleep from plain and simple fatigue. The next morning, up bright and early, I turned in my bedding and boarded a small boat along with people from other civilian firms and the military services.

The lagoon water was calm as usual. The trip between the islands was pleasant, although we may have been a bit wet from salt spray, but that was something we expected.

We were met by a truck on the second island and taken to an airstrip. Here we were briefed for our flight and most of us listened to a colorless recitation that we had heard on numerous occasions before. After this briefing covering life vest and lifeboat usage, we donned our life vests and boarded the airplane.

Eventually we reached the third island. A few months ago this island had a good airstrip and a few buildings, which housed communications equipment and a mess hall, but not anymore. Now we were lucky to be able to find an airstrip. The island had been accidentally swept clean by an oversized nuclear bomb blast. Some

rubble remained and had been arranged to give some protection from the sun while we waited for the next phase of our journeys.

After we landed, most of us were met by helicopters or small boats going to various locations. Three or four Air Force enlisted men and I were going to the same ship, but our helicopter appeared to be missing.. I spoke to one of the pilots who agreed to come back as soon as he could to transfer us. We sat under a makeshift shelter and waited. We were not quite alone. Another small group of military people were doing some work nearby.

Time passed by. The other group ate their rations. We waited. The helicopter pilot was very slow. I questioned the other group about transportation. They didn't know anything that would help us.. I asked them about communications. They said that there was none available. We waited another helpless hour. While we waited, I dug around the rubble and found one of our "EG and G's" waterproof radios that had been placed there after the island had been swept clean by the nuclear blast. I turned it on. The receiver worked. I pressed the transmitter button and spoke, "This is Martin Shapiro of E G and G. Do you read me?" I was answered by cold empty silence and then about a very long minute later, I heard, "This is -----, we read you." I told the voice that we were stranded and asked for help. The voice came back 15 minutes or so later and told us that we were the victims of a foul up and as soon as a helicopter and a pilot could be located we would be taken off the island. This would take at least two hours. We felt better. Even if this promise were broken, we had communications to help us.

(3)

It had been a long day. We were up earlier than usual. Some of us had no breakfast and lunch was way overdue. The other group had long since eaten and had no additional rations. Everyone gets very hungry in the tropics even under "normal" conditions. Now under stressful conditions we felt close to starvation. We had no way of knowing when we would be able to eat, which made the situation even worse. We talked about it for a while which didn't help much except it kept me thinking and I remembered the unopened package that I had packed with my clothes earlier. My parents had been sending cookies. Maybe this package had more of them. I opened my bag and then tore open the package.

There on a hot desert-like island isolated from the world, I opened a box of Passover Matzos. None of the airmen were Jewish, but they all appreciated the Matzos and my rendition of the story of Passover. Sometime later, as a result of my

radio call, a helicopter took us to an aircraft carrier and we were eventually transferred to our assigned ship.

This story is true. It happened some 3000 years after Moses led his people from Egypt through the burning desert where they ate Matzos. It happened on the other side of the earth where I led my airmen through the tropics to our destination and by a series of events that suggests God's hand, I found Matzos for "my people".