

Pesach 5780 – Rabbi Dr. Zev Wiener

Prima facie, Matzah doesn't make much sense. Nicknamed "poor man's bread," it is hard, physically unimpressive, and bereft of any flavorful additives. According to some opinions, we are not even supposed to pour salt on it at the Seder, so as not to enhance its taste. And yet, at the very same time, the Halacha seems intent on having us love the taste of Matzah. For example, we are not permitted to eat any Matzah from the morning of Erev Pesach (and many refrain from eating any for at least a month beforehand) so the taste of Matzah will be dear to us on Seder night. Moreover, we are not permitted to eat anything that may fill us up on Erev Pesach, in order to whet our appetites to enjoy this most unaccommodated of foods. The question is obvious: what is there to enjoy about this "poor man's bread?"

In reality, the simplicity of Matzah is actually its greatest virtue. In avoiding chametz, we strip away all notions of excess, lavishness, and superficiality, and savor the liberation that comes from simplicity. Luxury and extravagance, while not prohibited by Judaism, place a person at risk of becoming enslaved, if one feels that one cannot live without them. A person who feels compelled to live with luxury is far less free than a person who enjoys luxuries as a blessing from the Almighty, but is not beholden to them. Indeed, a central Torah value is the ability to find genuine joy in simple and little things in life. Berachot are recited on the most basic of foods -- even if they're not gourmet catering -- to focus our attention on this point: rather than mindlessly gulping down a glass of orange juice, we pause to savor this simple pleasure as a Divine gift.

Being discriminating and demanding in one's tastes is often seen as a mark of high class and intelligence. Cultured people may sometimes set very high standards for their food, entertainment, and company, and see those who do not share those standards as boorish and unsophisticated. In reality, however, it is precisely the capacity to be easily pleased that allows us to live a free life, and to truly love others in our life. I recently learned of a pious rabbi who happily ate the same meager breakfast every morning for probably close to 70 years. I recall a taxi driver from the coast of Senegal telling me of the joy he felt growing up there, despite owning only 2 sets of clothes. Many have remarked at the beauty and love that are palpably sensed in the relative simplicity of many Israeli weddings.

In addition to the emotional challenges it will inevitably bring, Pesach of 5780 will likely be far simpler than Pesach ever was for most of us. No hotels, no Seder guests, perhaps a smaller variety of foods. And yet, to dismiss this year's Seder as any less significant would be a terrible mistake. Through its simplicity, this year's Seder has the potential to reconnect us to a critical spiritual value that is often lost. Whether we find ourselves having the Seder alone or with family, let us focus on loving the simple taste of Matzah, experiencing the joy that comes from a deep sense of gratitude for the simple blessings we do still have -- our personal health, our home, our food, our relationships, and our faith. And in the merit of this joy may we b'eH reunite to celebrate many more beautiful Sedarim together in future years.