

# Yachatz: The Great Divide

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RABBI BARUCH TAUB

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## Preface

**SEDER MEMORIES RUN** deep for everyone. But perhaps the most prominent memory is the moment of *Yachatz*, the breaking of the middle matzah into two halves at the beginning of the Seder. All eyes are on *Zeidy*, or on Father, or on whoever may be running the Seder, following him as he performs the ritual of *Kadesh*, *Urchatz*, *Karpas*, and finally *Yachatz*, when he breaks the center matzah into two halves, placing one of the halves between the two other matzot. And then all eyes, those of the children and of the “former children” at the table, follow the hiding of the bigger half of matzah like detectives.<sup>1</sup> To be honest, it is one of my fondest childhood Seder memories, and I am sure it is a vivid memory for many of you as well. But what is it really all about, and why do we ceremoniously break the matzah at the beginning of the Seder? Interestingly enough, Rambam does not include *Yachatz* in his Haggadah.<sup>2</sup> So why do we actually carry out this ceremony? Why do we hide the second half of the matzah?

Some are of the opinion that this an extension of the theme of *k'dei she-yishalu ha-tinokot*, in order to increase the curiosity of the children attending the Seder and encourage them to ask us about this diversion from our normal practice. Beit Yosef, in his commentary on the Tur, mentions this as one of the three reasons for this practice.<sup>3</sup> Let us think about this answer. Just imagine the child asking his father why he broke the matzah and father answers “in order to bring you to ask me about it.” Does not this response just add insult to injury?

There is, however, a novel educational tool that is embedded in this directive of the Rabbis. The idea behind *k'dei she-yishalu ha-tinokot*, of stimulating questions, is that it develops and encourages intellectual curiosity among children and among adults. This is the beginning of the process of education.

I wish to explore the basis of the practice of breaking the middle matzah and argue for an approach which goes beyond just the encouragement of questions both at the halachic

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1. All of us were once children. On Seder night, the goal is to awaken our inner child again.
  2. See *Mishneh Torah*, end of *Hilchot Chametz U-matzah*.
  3. Beit Yosef, *Orach Chayim* 473.

**BARUCH TAUB** is the Rabbi Emeritus of the BAYT. He lives in Netanya, Israel.

level as well as at the hashkafic level. Indeed, if we break the matzah just “so the kids should ask,” it seems quite strange that we begin the entire Seder with a somewhat arbitrary act. The prominent placement of *Yachatz* implies that there is more to this act than just stimulating questions. I will argue that there is much more to *Yachatz* than what meets the eye. The broken matzah, which we hide, holds the promise of a hidden dimension. In fact, the act of breaking the matzah reveals a centerpiece of Jewish life and the Torah at large. It also has a particular meaning for us, in these uncertain and challenging times in Jewish history.

## Part 1: Yachatz: The Halachic Discussion

Let us begin with citing from the classical halachic literature regarding the practice of *Yachatz*.

The Rabbis of the Talmud write the following in *Berachot* (39b):

*Rav Pappa said: Everyone agrees that while fulfilling the mitzvah of eating matzah on Passover, one places the piece inside the whole and breaks it. What is the reason? With regard to matzah, the phrase ‘bread of affliction’ (Devarim 16:3) is written, and the poor typically eat their bread in pieces. Therefore, with respect to eating matzah on Passover evening, the broken matzah is also significant.*<sup>4</sup>

There is an additional source in the Talmud that makes reference to *Yachatz* in *Pesachim* (115a) as well:

*Shmuel said that the phrase: ‘The bread of affliction [lechem oni]’ (Devarim 16:3) means bread over which one answers [onim] matters, i.e., one recites the Haggadah over matzah. That was also taught in a baraita: Lechem oni is bread over which one answers many matters. Alternatively, in that verse, the word ‘oni’ is actually written without a vav, [resulting in a word] which means a poor person. Just as it is the manner of a poor person to eat a piece of bread for lack of a whole loaf, so too, here, he should use a piece of matzah.*

The Shulchan Aruch writes the following about *Yachatz*:

*He should then take the middle matzah and break it into two halves, giving one half to one of the assembled to guard it for use as the afikoman and it is placed under the tablecloth, and the second half should be placed between the two whole matzot. He should then lift up the Seder plate (ke’ara) with the matzot and say the passage ‘ha lachma anya’ until the ‘ma nishtanah.’*<sup>5</sup>

Mishnah Berurah adds a crucial piece of information regarding the practice of *Yachatz*. He states that, “It is preferable that the piece that is saved (for the *afikoman*) be the bigger half of the two.”<sup>6</sup>

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4. The Schottenstein Edition (*Brachot* 39b:2) translates the first sentence as follows: “One places the broken piece of matzah inside (i.e. under) the whole matzah...”

5. *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim* 473:6.

6. *Mishnah Berurah* 473:58.

## The Questions

Given the above-cited sources, several questions arise:

1. Why would the Rabbis choose a seemingly technical act, of breaking the matzah, to be included as a fundamental part of the Seder?
2. There seems to be a tension between two contradictory ideas and emotions in relation to matzah. Matzah seems, on the one hand, to symbolize poverty and affliction (a poor person eats broken pieces). On the other hand, it is the bread upon which we speak of the redemption, the related concepts of freedom (*cheirut*), and reclining royalty or kicking back (*haseiba*).
3. Why do we hide the broken half?
4. Why is the middle matzah used for this practice?

It should be pointed out that Rambam's approach to this practice is entirely different from that of most *Rishonim*. According to Rambam, we have only two matzot at the Seder.<sup>7</sup> The majority of *Rishonim*, as codified in *Shulchan Aruch*, are of the opinion that we use three matzot and we practice *Yachatz* as described above, at the beginning of the Seder. We therefore will attempt to solve these questions with the assistance of several commentaries.

## The Answers

The first Rebbe of Lubavitch, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi (also known as the Baal HaTanya), authored a halachic work that is highly regarded by all Torah scholars, Hassidim and non-Hassidim alike. This work is entitled *Shulchan Aruch Ha-Rav*. The *Shulchan Aruch Ha-Rav* actually merges the two aspects of the broken piece of matzah into one halachic principle. The matzah that should be used during the reading of the Haggadah must be a halachically-defined matzah. Meaning, a matzah that is eaten by the poor and is present when the *sippur yetziat mitzrayim* (the recounting of the Exodus from Egypt) is recited. The broken matzah represents this. In this way, *Shulchan Aruch Ha-Rav* combines the two aspects of matzah cited in the Talmud into one definition.<sup>8</sup>

Yet another different and innovative approach to the significance of breaking the matzah at the beginning of the Seder was posited by Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach and recorded by his students:

*Breaking of the matzah — to fulfill the mitzvah of eating a piece of matzah — immediately after the Kiddush is also, it seems, to show that we are already involved in the process of eating matzah. Since the recitation of the Haggadah is also a component of the process of eating matzah, then there is no actual gap (hefsek) between the Kiddush and the meal.<sup>9</sup>*

In order to fully comprehend R. Shlomo Zalman's novel idea we must first note a basic

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7. *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Chametz U-matzah* 8:6.

8. *Shulchan Aruch Ha-Rav* 473:36.

9. *Halichot Shlomo, Moadim* 9:29(56).

halachah with regard to Kiddush in general which applies all year round. A fundamental condition which validates the act of Kiddush is that it must be recited in the presence of a meal. This general rule is termed *Kiddush bi-makom seudah*.<sup>10</sup> On Seder night there is a long break between Kiddush at the beginning of the Seder until we actually start eating the meal. How then do we fulfill the requirement of *Kiddush bi-makom seudah* on the Seder night? To address this, R. Shlomo Zalman suggests that the breaking of the matzah at *Yachatz*, immediately after Kiddush, bridges the gap between the Kiddush and the subsequent meal. This is because, by preparing the matzah for the *Hamotzi* blessing which will be said on the broken matzah at the beginning of the meal, we are doing something related to the meal immediately after Kiddush. Therefore, this single act of breaking the matzah connects the Kiddush to the meal to be eaten later on during the night. According to this explanation, the expression “breaking bread together” aptly describes the Seder.

Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin, also known as the Netziv of Volozhin, was bothered by an additional halachic concern regarding the broken matzah. As we are all aware, we are particular to use two whole loaves of bread as *lechem mishneh* on Shabbat. How can we then deliberately break a matzah into two pieces, in order to use the broken piece for the blessing to be said later on during the Seder?<sup>11</sup>

The Netziv resolves this concern by introducing the idea that “whole” is a relative term that is defined by the point when the matzah is received. We can comprehend this idea by observing the baking process at a matzah bakery. In the first step, one man thoroughly kneads a large piece of dough. The kneader then starts tearing off small pieces of dough, distributing them to the assembled workers, who turn each small piece into a single matzah. When we receive the single matzah we view it as a “whole” matzah, despite the fact that in actuality it is a small piece torn from a large dough at the factory. Similarly, since there is a lengthy time period separating the breaking and receiving of the matzah, by the time the blessing over the broken matzah comes along, following this great divide, we should view it as a “whole” matzah.<sup>12</sup>

### Rambam’s Approach

All of the above relates to the position adopted by the vast majority of the *Rishonim* and *Poskim*. However, Rambam takes a unique approach to *Yachatz*. Rambam, in his halachic work *Yad Ha-chazakah*, provides us with a detailed list of the order of the Seder night:

*Afterwards, he recites the blessing, al netilat yadayim, and washes his hands a second time, for he diverted his attention [from his hands] during the time he was reciting the Haggadah. He*

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10. Parenthetically, this general rule poses a problem when we make Kiddush in shul on Shabbat morning. People should make sure they eat a minimal amount of *mezonot* (a pastry for example), in order to fulfill the requirement of a *seudah* (meal). It should be noted that those who follow the Vilna Gaon will repeat Kiddush once again upon sitting down to the main meal at home. See *Maaseh Rav*, 122.

11. *Teshuvot Meishiv Davar* 1:21.

12. *Ibid.*

takes two cakes [r'kikim, of matzah], divides [vi-cholek] one of them, places the broken half inside the whole [cake] and recites the blessing, *Hamotzi lechem min ha'aretz*. Why does he not recite a blessing on two whole loaves, as on other festivals? Because [Devarim 16:3] states 'the bread of poverty.' Just as a poor person is accustomed to eating a *prusa* [broken loaf], so too a *prusa* should be used [as a 'whole' loaf for *lechem mishneh*].<sup>13</sup>

According to Rambam, *Yachatz* is not a dramatic act carried out at the beginning of the Seder. The "drama" of *Yachatz* at the beginning of the Seder seems to be substituted for by a simple breaking of the matzah before *Hamotzi* in order to create a different kind of *lechem mishneh* with two whole loaves of a different kind, the "whole matzah" being simply a *prusa* [a broken piece].

It is noteworthy that Rambam initially says that one should use only two matzot (and not three) at the Seder. Consequently, after breaking the matzah, Rambam cannot write that we place the broken half between the two whole matzot, as there is only one whole matzah left. Rambam therefore writes that one should place the broken matzah "into" the whole matzah. Some understand this to mean that one should place the broken piece "under" the whole matzah. Others understand this to mean that the matzot used by Rambam were soft and flexible, similar to those used by many Sephardim until today. This matzah is reminiscent of a pita that has a "pocket" for falafel. In this manner, one can literally place the broken piece "into" the whole matzah.

There is an additional halachah which Rambam relates regarding the end of the Seder night:

*Afterwards, one continues the meal, eating whatever one desires to eat and drinking whatever one desires to drink. At its conclusion, one eats from the Paschal sacrifice, even [as small a portion as] a kezayit, and does not taste anything afterwards. At present, one eats a kezayit matzah and does not taste anything afterwards, so that after the completion of the meal, the taste of the meat of the Paschal sacrifice or the matzah will [remain] in one's mouth, for eating them is the [essence of the] mitzvah.*<sup>14</sup>

A careful reading of Rambam clearly shows that he describes the breaking of the matzah for the *afikoman* as an act done immediately before it is eaten, at the end of the Seder. There is no drama mentioned here of children hiding the broken piece to be used for the *afikoman*, but rather a simple act of breaking the matzah immediately before it is eaten.

Rabbi Avraham Gershon Zaks, a grandson of the Chafetz Chayim, explains both citations of Rambam in the following manner: It seems clear that both acts of breaking the matzah, according to Rambam, are to be carried out right before they are to be eaten. The first act of breaking is to be carried out before the eating it after *Maggid*, and the second act of breaking is right before the eating of the *afikoman*.<sup>15</sup>

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13. *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Chametz U-matzah* 8:6.

14. *Ibid.* 8:9.

15. *Hagadat Hagershuni*.

I believe that Rambam is of the opinion that the act of breaking the matzah is a function related to the act of *eating* the matzah. The other Rishonim are of the opinion that the act of breaking the matzah has significance of its own. This is demonstrated by the fact that breaking the matzah is done at the beginning of the Seder, a very long time before the act of eating it. According to these *Rishonim*, it may be safely said that the breaking of the matzah is a function of the Seder. Whereas, according to Rambam, the breaking of the matzah is a function of the eating of the matzah.

Rambam's opinion is clarified and explained quite differently by Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik.<sup>16</sup> R. Soloveitchik disagrees with the approach of *Shulchan Aruch Ha-Rav* mentioned above. R. Soloveitchik is of the opinion that the two aspects of matzah, a poor person's bread and "bread that words (*Maggid*) are spoken over," cannot be merged into one concept. To the contrary, these are two separate concepts of matzah that are expressed at two different times during the Seder night.

One aspect of matzah is *lechem oni* (the poor person's bread). Matzah is the bread of the poor because a poor person eats scraps. This aspect is totally related to the act of eating. For this reason, Rambam attaches the breaking of the matzah that symbolizes the poor person's bread, to the act of eating. The matzah is not broken at the beginning of the Seder, but rather right before the act of eating matzah after *Maggid*, and before the eating of the *afikoman* at the end of the meal. So, it is quite literally "a poor person's bread" because it is eating the broken scrapes of matzah.

The second aspect of matzah is the bread over which the story of the triumph and the Exodus is told. This aspect of matzah is not the poor person's bread; it is rather a whole and complete matzah. This is the matzah that is used from the beginning of the Seder through *Maggid* until the meal itself. This is precisely why Rambam does not instruct us to break the matzah at the beginning of the Seder.

## Snatching The Matzah

There is a practice on Seder night of "snatching the matzah." Although at first glance, the snatching of the matzah seems unrelated to *Yachatz*, R. Soloveitchik draws a connection between them. The custom of "matzah snatching" is codified by Rambam.<sup>17</sup> I will present here the standard translation of the passage. However, subsequently I will present an alternative reading of this passage, as it appears in R. Soloveitchik's explanation.

Here is the standard translation of the passage:

*He should make changes on this night so that the children will see and will [be motivated to] ask...What changes should be made?...Matzot should be snatched from each other and the like.*<sup>18</sup>

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16. *Sefer Hararei Kedem* 2:79.

17. *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Chametz U-matzah* 7:3.

18. *Ibid.*

This translation is based on the common usage of the word *chotfin* in Hebrew, which is a verb meaning “snatch.” Meiri, actually explains that our minhag today, of encouraging the children to snatch the *afikoman* from the one conducting the Seder and to hide it, is based on this passage of Rambam.<sup>19</sup> Meiri clearly understands the term *chotfin* as “snatching.” Ravaad, in his commentary on Rambam, understands the term *chotfin* to mean to do something with “alacrity” or “speed.”<sup>20</sup> According to this usage of the term, the *minhag* (custom) was to pass the matzah from one to another quickly.

R. Soloveitchik adds that this practice inevitably would cause the matzah to break into pieces, hence a “*Yachatz* moment” according to Rambam as well. The reason behind this practice is to ensure that the children are awake and alert during the Seder, allowing them to question and inquire about the different aspects of the Seder. For R. Soloveitchik, Rambam is, in fact, introducing a view of a dramatic *Yachatz*. It is included at the very beginning of the Seder as a function of the concept “in order that the children should ask.” However, since this *Yachatz* is not universal, and is done only if there are children present, it is not an official *siman* (stage) of the Seder.

I wish to add two related observations of my own, in relation to the idea presented by R. Soloveitchik. First, Seder night is a concretization of many philosophical and historical ideas, which are handed down through our *mesorah* (tradition), from generation to generation. For example, we eat bitter herbs because it was bitter in Egypt. The idea of handing the matzah from one to another, from parents to children, is an act symbolizing this passing down of the *mesorah* to the next generation. This is in line with the words of the Haggadah, “*cheiyav adam lir’ot et atzmo k’ilu hu yatza mi-mitzrayim* – each and every one of us must feel that he himself had left Egypt.” The physical act of passing around the matzah enhances this feeling.

Second, according to the other *Rishonim*, only the one conducting the Seder is involved in this form of transmission, because only he “snatches” the matzah. However, according to Rambam, everyone at the Seder “snatches the matzah because everyone is involved in the transmission of our *mesorah* through the “*Yachatz* act.”

### How Can We “Pass Over” the Top Matzah?

There is a general rule known as “*ein ma’avirin al ha-mitzvot*.” This rule teaches us that if one has an opportunity to perform a mitzvah you may not “skip over” this opportunity and perform a different mitzvah. An example of the implementation of this rule is related to the current coronavirus situation. Let us imagine a doctor who enters a hospital ward treating corona patients and spots a relative lying on the tenth bed inside the room. May the doctor run to treat his relative before the other patients? Rabbi Moshe Feinstein rules that doing so would be in violation of *ein ma’avirin al hamitzvot*.<sup>21</sup> In his view, the doctor must deal with the first patient he encounters upon entering the ward.

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19. Meiri, *Beit HaBechirah*, *Pesachim* 109.

20. Commentary on Rambam, *Hilchot Chametz U-matzah* 7:3.

21. *Iggrot Moshe*, *Choshen Mishpat* 2:73(2).

Why then, do we “skip over” the top matzah and perform *Yachatz* on the middle matzah? Truth be told, there is a disagreement among the *Rishonim* regarding this practice. Rokei’ah and Smag rule that one should use the top matzah for *Yachatz*.<sup>22</sup> We, however, follow the opinion of Rosh and Mordechai who rule that one should use the middle matzah for *Yachatz*, in line with the ruling of Shulchan Aruch.<sup>23</sup>

But what is the rationale behind this ruling of Rosh, Mordechai and Shulchan Aruch?

Although Bach<sup>24</sup> attempts to explain the position of Mordechai, the latter does not need any assistance, as he addressed this question himself:

*The middle matzah is broken, and half is kept for the afikoman. We cannot say the top one is broken because of the concept “you do not pass over a mitzvah” because there is no mitzvah performed in breaking the matzah in two.*<sup>25</sup>

Mordechai is actually telling us that *Yachatz* is not a violation of “passing over a mitzvah” because *Yachatz* is, in fact, *not a mitzvah!* *Yachatz* is rather a re-enactment.

In summation, it is clear from a halachic perspective that *Yachatz* is fundamental to the Seder. It is not an arbitrary or prosaic preparatory act before the Seder begins. Nor is it merely to encourage the children to ask questions. According to the Baal HaTanya, the act of breaking the matzah in two allows for the combination of the two aspects of matzah: poor man’s bread and the bread over which we recite the Haggadah. For R. Shlomo Zalman, by breaking the matzah we join Kiddush with our meal. According to Rambam, as explained by R. Soloveitchik, *Yachatz* highlights the matzah as the poor man’s bread and is actually done immediately before we eat the matzah.

We have discussed why *Yachatz* is crucial for the Seder from a halachic vantage point. However, I would like to argue that *Yachatz* is perhaps the most important act that we perform at the Seder because of what it represents about us, about G-d, and about our history. In the past, I have often cited the statement made by Rebbe Menachem Mendel of Kotzk that there is nothing more complete, nothing more whole, than a broken heart. More than this brokenness, which the matzah represents, the matzah which is broken into two parts represents the historic Jewish experience.

## **Part 2: Yachatz: The Great Divide: The Centerpiece of Jewish life**

### **Three Yachatz Moments**

We find many “*Yachatz* moments” throughout Jewish life. *Yachatz* moments are essential for Yiddishkeit.

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22. See Beit Yosef, *Orach Chayim* 473 s.v. *yayikach*.

23. Shulchan Aruch, *Orach Chayim* 473:1.

24. Bach 473:11.

25. Mordechai, *Hagaot* 38.

In addition to the actual *Yachatz* consisting of breaking the matzah at the beginning of the Seder, we find another *Yachatz* moment during the Seder in the form of breaking up the Hallel said during the Haggadah into two parts. Similarly, every Brit Milah is a *Yachatz* moment in which we perform a physical separation in order to enter into a covenant with G-d.

Here are three major *Yachatz* moments in Jewish History.

The first *Yachatz* moment occurred at the very beginning of the world, at the time of Creation:

*G-d saw that the light was good, and G-d separated between the light and the darkness...So G-d made the firmament, and separated between the waters that were beneath the firmament and the waters which were above the firmament. And it was so... And G-d made the two great luminaries... And G-d set them in the firmament...to dominate by day and by night, and to separate between the light and the darkness. And G-d saw that it was good.*<sup>26</sup>

At the very beginning of Creation, G-d carried out several *Yachatz* moments by dividing light from darkness, as well as dividing the water under the sky from the water above the sky. Later in this chapter, G-d divided the animal species into several types and separated them from the crawling insects. Incidentally, the recent coronavirus, according to one theory, is said to have emanated from a combination of the DNA of a bat and the DNA of another animal. Perhaps G-d's "dividing" moments during Creation were crucial to the world's survival. If these "divides" were not implemented, it appears as though Creation itself would not have been accomplished.

The Creation of Man was a dividing moment as well. Man was "divided" from the rest of Creation because he was created "*b'tzelem Elokim*, in the image of G-d." But what does "in the image of G-d" mean? If someone from Mars would suddenly appear on earth, and we would hand him a Chumash with the first parsha of Bereishit, he would learn two things about G-d. Firstly, that G-d creates and secondly, that He divides. Throughout Bereishit G-d is creating and dividing constantly. Consequently, Man, who was created in G-d's image, must be, like G-d, constantly involved in creating and dividing. In fact, Man is in his most godly moments and is at his best, when he performs *Yachatz*, i.e., when he utilizes the ability to divide and make distinctions in his life.

The second *Yachatz* moment in history is the *Brit bein habetarim* (the covenant of the pieces) between G-d and Avraham Avinu. This covenant consisted of Avraham preparing a sacrifice by breaking it precisely into two halves:

*And He said to him, "Take for Me three heifers and three goats and three rams, and a turtle dove and a young bird." And he took for Him all these, and he divided them in the middle, and he placed each part opposite its mate, but he did not divide the birds.*<sup>27</sup>

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26. Bereishit 1:4, 7, 16-18.

27. Bereishit 15:9-10.

G-d then puts Avraham Avinu to sleep and reveals to him the covenant between Himself and the Jewish people. This breaking “Yachatz moment” of the sacrifice was the preamble to the next crucial four hundred years that shaped Jewish history. It is from this point in history that Yitzchak wandered without any permanent home, Yaakov suffered, and later the Jewish people were exiled to Egypt. This *Yachatz* moment eventually led to the nation entering Eretz Yisrael and receiving it as our homeland.

The third *Yachatz* moment is the covenant which served as the preamble to Matan Torah at Sinai.

*And Moshe wrote all the words of the L-rd, and he arose early in the morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain and twelve monuments for the twelve tribes of Israel. And he sent the youth and they offered up burnt offerings, and they slaughtered peace offerings to the L-rd, bulls. And Moshe took half the blood and put it into the basins, and half the blood he cast onto the altar. And he took the Book of the Covenant and read it within the hearing of the people, and they said, “All that the Lord spoke we will do and we will hear.”<sup>28</sup>*

An additional preamble to the receiving of the Torah was another “breaking” moment in the form of “splitting” the Sea of Reeds (*yam suf*).<sup>29</sup> In fact, the *Baalei Ha-Tosafot* explain the practice of *Yachatz* at the Seder as a reenactment of this “breaking” or “splitting” event.<sup>30</sup> Once again, we find that the preparatory act of the giving of the Torah at Sinai was a “*Yachatz* moment.”

Rashi writes that the division of the blood described in these verses was carried out by an angel.<sup>31</sup> Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner explains the necessity of performing the division only by an angel. When forming a covenantal relationship between Man and G-d there is a need for Divine intervention in order to precisely divide the blood in half.<sup>32</sup>

### Why is a *Yachatz* Moment Necessary?

Each of these watershed moments in Jewish history share a common thread – a splitting or dividing moment. In the Creation narrative, the covenant formed with Avraham Avinu, and the revelation at Sinai, the drama is introduced with a “*Yachatz* moment.” Indeed, Man is called on to imitate G-d by utilizing his creative abilities to both create and divide. By creating divisions and distinctions within his life, Man brings the divine into his life.

Taking R. Hutner’s idea further, it appears that when establishing covenantal relationships, as well as when living divinely, there is a need for dividing or splitting. Why do we need a “breaking” moment in order to establish a stronger relationship with G-d? Why actually “break” in order to become closer? How does separation bring about togetherness? This counter-intuitive idea is reinforced by a Tannaic Midrash.

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28. Shemot 24:4–7.

29. Shemot 14:21.

30. *Daat Z'keinim* Shemot 12:2.

31. Rashi Shemot 24:6.

32. Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner, *Pachad Yitzchak, Shavuot*, no. 41 (Gur Aryeh, 1983).

The following dialogue, one of many, is reported in the name of Rabbi Yosi ben Halafta, one of the Mishnah's most prominent sages, in a conversation with an unnamed matron, a Roman woman of rank:

*Rabbi Yehudah bar Simon began: "G-d returns the solitary ones homeward" (Tehillim 58:7). A Roman Matron asked Rabbi Yosi ben Halafta, "In how many days did G-d create the world?" He said, "In six, as it is said, 'Since six days G-d made...' (Shemot 20:11)." "And since then," she asked, "what has G-d been doing?" "G-d sits [on the Heavenly Throne] and makes matches: the daughter of this one to that one, the wife [i.e. widow] of this one to that one, the money of this one to that one," responded R. Yosi. She said, "And for merely this you believe in Him! Even I can do that. I have many slaves, both male and female. In no time at all, I can match them for marriage." R. Yosi responded, "Though this may be an easy thing for you to do, for G-d it is as difficult as splitting the Sea of Reeds." What did the Matron do? She went and matched her slaves, giving this man to that woman, this woman to that man, and so on. Some time after, the couples argued, this woman saying, 'I do not want this man' while another protested, 'I do not want that woman.' She admitted to R. Yosi, 'There is no god like your G-d. It is true; your Torah is indeed beautiful and praiseworthy.'*<sup>33</sup>

R. Yosi's response, that for G-d matchmaking is "as difficult as splitting the Sea of Reeds," requires explanation. Why would making a match, a shidduch, be compared to an act of splitting? It would seem that the metaphor would make more sense if he had said, "A shidduch is as difficult as grafting two disparate fruits on a tree."

The answer is that forging a covenantal relationship whether personal or national requires a *Yachat* moment. In order to become close to G-d we must separate ourselves from ungodly ideas. We must make a *Yachat* in order to become close to G-d. Similarly, when a *chatan* and *kallah* wish to create a relationship, they are creating something that is set apart from anyone else. It goes without saying that they must have a relationship with the rest of the world. But their relationship, one with each other, must be one that is separate from the rest of the world. It is for this precise reason that the blessings said at *Sheva Brachot* deal with involvement in the world, in order to stress that this aspect is important as well. However, they must create their own unique relationship independent of their obligation to society outside their marriage.

This concept is true as well with regard to our unique relationship with G-d. Although the Jewish people are separate from the world in this regard, we must engage with the rest of the world. In fact, we have a responsibility to the rest of the world. We are distinct, but we are "of" this world, but not above it!

There is yet another *Yachat* moment in Jewish History that must be mentioned. This is the moment when we broke the above-mentioned covenant between G-d and the Jewish people that had been forged at the foot of Mount Sinai. The Jewish people created the golden

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33. *Bereishit Rabbah* 68:4.

calf. How does Moshe respond to this crisis? When Moshe sees the relationship between G-d and the Jewish people in danger, what does he do to restore this relationship? Moshe breaks the *luchot* (tablets) at the precise location of the original covenant, at the foot of the mountain, *tachat ha-har*:

*It happened as he drew near the camp and saw the calf and the dances, that Moshe's anger flared up. He threw down the Tablets from his hands and shattered them at the foot of the mountain.*<sup>34</sup>

This was a premeditated, calculated act on the part of Moshe. What Moshe did was to shock the Jewish people in order to get their attention. He managed to cause the Jewish people to recalibrate their lives, through a “Yachatz moment.”

The Midrash comments:

*To enter into the covenant with the L-rd your G-d even through His oath, Three covenants did the Holy One make with Israel: one when they came out of Egypt, one when they stood before Mount Sinai, and one here [under the mountain]. But why did he make a covenant with them here? Because they had revoked the one that he had made with them on Sinai, when they said [of the Golden Calf] ‘This is your G-d, O Israel.’<sup>35,36</sup>*

If we follow the dialogue between Moshe and G-d following this episode we will realize that every time Moshe asked something from G-d and G-d agreed to his request, Moshe followed up by asking for something else. The final result is the following verse:

*And He said: Behold! I will form a covenant; in the presence of all your people, I will make distinctions [nifla'ot] such as have not been created upon all the earth and among all the nations, and all the people in whose midst you are shall see the work of the L-rd, how awe inspiring it is that which I will perform with you (Shemot 34:10).*

This verse reveals to us that G-d did, in fact, restore the original covenant. The covenant which was originally formed through a *Yachatz* moment at Sinai, was re-instituted by another *Yachatz* moment (of breaking the *luchot*) as well! A careful reading of this verse reveals the term *nifla'ot*, which is generally understood to mean “miracles,” is defined differently by Rashi. He explains that in this context the term means that G-d will make “distinctions.” G-d will make more *Yachatz* between you and the rest of the world.<sup>37</sup>

Seforno stresses the significance of this renewed covenant. The covenant now means that wherever we go in Exile, G-d will be with us. The Jews went to Spain and G-d's presence was with us; so too in Turkey, in Auschwitz and finally back to Eretz Yisrael, G-d is with us:

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34. Shemot 32:19.

35. Shemot 32:4.

36. *Midrash Tanchuma Devarim* 29:11.

37. Rashi, Shemot 34:10. The Hebrew phrase “*nifla'ot a'aseh*” is an expression related to the word *v-nifleinu*, meaning “and we shall be distinguished” [and separated from all the nations]. See *Shemot* 33:16.

*Behold! I will form a covenant to be in your midst” (Shemot 34:10). When the Jewish people were exiled to Babylonia the presence of the L-rd was “exiled” together with them, i.e. accompanied them. When they were exiled to Eylam the same was true. Even when they were exiled to Edom (by the Romans) this remained true.<sup>38</sup>*

When Moshe carried out this *Yachatz* moment by breaking the *luchot*, G-d’s reaction was as follows, as cited by Rashi on the final verse of the entire Chumash:

*Never again has there arisen in Israel a prophet like Moshe... as evidenced by...all the strong hand and awesome power that Moshe performed before the eyes of all Israel.<sup>39</sup>*

Rashi explains the phrase “before the eyes of all Israel”:

*This refers to the fact that his heart inspired him to shatter the Tablets before their eyes, as it is said, (Devarim 9:17) “And I broke them before your eyes” (Sifrei, Devarim 357:45), and the opinion of the Holy One, blessed be He, regarding this action agreed with his opinion, as it is stated that G-d said of the Tablets (Shemot 34:1) *asher shibarta*, meaning “which you have broken,” [implying] “May your strength be fitting (*asher/yasher* as in *yasher koach*, an expression of thanks and congratulation) because you have broken them” (Yevamot 62a; Shabbat 87a).<sup>40</sup>*

G-d was telling Moshe, you understood what had to be done in this situation. You understood that you must carry out a *Yachatz* moment in order to get the attention of the Jewish people.

## Hiding the Bigger Piece

Returning to the original questions:

Why would the Rabbis choose a seemingly technical act, of breaking the matzah, as a fundamental part of the Seder? Why do we hide the broken half? Why is the middle matzah used for this practice?

Clearly the breaking of the matzah is not a technical or preparatory act. It is an essential message throughout all of Jewish history. On the night we retell the Exodus from Egypt and the story of our people, recalling our “*Yachatz* moments” in which we, as a people, formed a covenantal bond with G-d. The idea behind hiding the bigger piece of the broken matzah is simple. The focus of a covenant is not what was achieved in the time that has elapsed in the relationship, represented by the smaller piece. Rather the emphasis is the renewed relationship moving forward, the larger piece. There are endless possibilities to implement this renewed relationship with G-d.

## Our Current *Yachatz* Moment

Not only are “*Yachatz* moments” essential in our history and for our relationship with our spouses, and with G-d, we are currently living in a “*Yachatz* moment,” a broken moment. We are currently struggling to balance the two aspects of matzah: the *lechem oni*, the poor,

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38. Seforno Shemot 34:10.

39. Shemot 34:10–12.

40. Rashi Devarim 34:12.

the sadness, and the anxiety. While at the same time, we experience the “bread over which the story of the triumph and the Exodus is told,” with praise and thanks to G-d for the goodness that He gives us. However, this is not new to the Jewish people. A respected Canadian academic named John Kenneth Galbraith once said that, “The mark of a true philosopher is one who can grasp two polar opposite philosophical ideas at once, defend them both, and live at peace with both ideas.” Actually, Galbraith was saying, in modern terms, something that the Chazon Ish stated a half-century earlier.

Rambam writes that one of the conditions of prophecy is *simchah* (happiness).<sup>41</sup> It is said in the name of the Chazon Ish that even the Lamentations of *Megillat Eicha* were written by Yirmiyahu HaNavi through prophecy in a state of *simcha*.<sup>42</sup> This means, said the Chazon Ish, that a Jew can hold onto two opposing emotions at once, and survive. This is how we have survived and this is how we will survive our current situation as well. We have two contradicting ideas running through our lives right now. However, we must understand that the *Yachatz* moment that we are living through is a preamble to better times. To borrow a popular contemporary phrase, the *Yachatz* moment is the “AHA!” moment in the Jewish experience.

At the end of the Seder, we declare “*L’shanah haba’ah bi-Yerushalyim* – Next year in Jerusalem.” The most profound national *Yachatz* moment was the *Yachatz* of the Temple, the destruction of the Temple. But we pray that we will merit to see the restored Beit Hamikdash very soon. Our learning and our mitzvot, our *simchat ha-chaim*, and our accepting and embracing G-d will bring that about.

*This article was originally delivered as the Derashat Shabbat Hagadol 5780/2020 at the Israel Center of the Orthodox Union in Jerusalem during the 2020 lockdown.*

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41. *Mishneh Torah, Yesodei Ha-Torah* 7:4.

42. I confirmed this citation of the Chazon Ish with Rabbi Meir Greineman, the Rosh Yeshiva of the Kollel Chazon Ish in Bnei Brak. He added that the Chazon Ish said that Yermiyahu composed *Eicha* with the *nusach* (tune) of *Megillas Esther*.