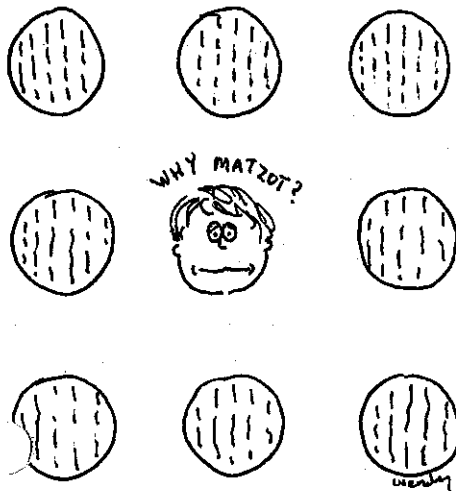


ברשת

WHY THE FESTIVAL OF MATZOT?

by Rabbi David Algaze



While the name of this holiday is usually Pesach, the name in the Torah is always Hag Hamatzot, the festival of the unleavened bread. What is so important or profound about a particular type of bread, that it merits such attention? Would it not have been more appropriately called "the Festival of the Exodus" or "Festival of Liberation?" Rabbi Shlomo Goren, the former Chief Rabbi of Israel, of blessed memory, once remarked that this appellation is like naming a sacred season "the Festival of Pizza"!

A second puzzlement concerns the fact that in Exodus 12:39 the Torah tells us, "and they baked the dough. . .into cakes of matzot, for it had not leavened, because they were thrown out of Egypt and could not tarry. . ." The implication is that the reason for the eating of the matza on Pesach is that it reminds us of the haste with which salvation came and with which G-d took us out of Egypt. The Haggadah, quoting the same verse offers this as
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AND GET YOURSELF FREE

by a Jew Named Patrick

Some time ago, songwriter Paul Simon composed a song about "freedom." With Pesach fast approaching, this seems an appropriate topic about which to reflect. The point of the Simon song was how to free oneself from a relationship, and it offered 50 ways of accomplishing this separation.

We Jews can improve on that. First, instead of 50 methods, in our case there are only 39. Second, in the song any single way would have sufficed, but in our case all 39 operate in unison to create a sense of total and complete freedom. Finally, with these 39 elements working in harmony, our personal relationships are enhanced and reach new heights, as well as our relationship to the Almighty. This opportunity for complete and total freedom is called -- Shabbat.

Having lived on both sides of the fence, I know what it means to live without Shabbat, and even more
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A PERSONAL EXODUS

by Helene Frank

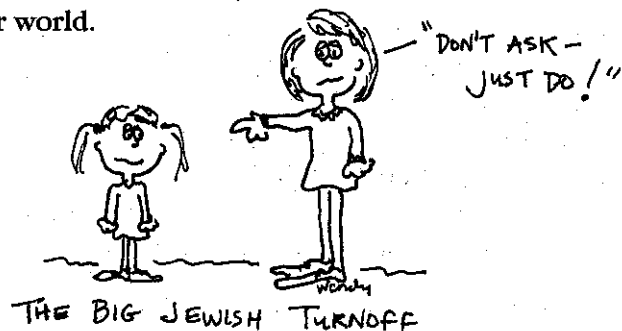
It's interesting how, through unexpected circumstances, we can be led onto a path of life leading to an unexpected direction. Recently, my path of life changed direction, and as a result I'm experiencing a personal Exodus. I call it "my personal Exodus," because I am leaving the bondage of a very limited knowledge of the rich history, tradition and language of my people, and am now entering the fascinating journey of Jewish education.

You may wonder how it happened that I, who was born into an Orthodox Jewish family, would wander so deeply into a secular world. I was one of three daughters, and our exposure to Judaism came from our household and the synagogue. I was always full of questions, and even at an early age I asked for Jewish religious instruction, so that I could learn Hebrew and Jewish history.

I knew about Shabbat, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Pesach, Shavuot, Succot, Chanukah and Purim, because
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we followed these traditions in our home. I knew about keeping a kosher home. But what I knew from this exposure was simply not enough for me. I yearned to know more and to understand more. However, at that time, my father, of blessed memory, said that it was not necessary for a girl to have a Jewish education. Secular education, at the highest level was encouraged, but not Jewish education. And so, many of my "whys?" went unanswered, or I was told: "Don't ask, just do!" It is not difficult to understand that my passion for Jewish knowledge and culture cooled down, and I was soon "turned off." I found myself more comfortable in the secular world.



And yet, my Jewish identity remained, even without total commitment to Jewish life. For many years I felt a spiritual emptiness, and only now am I becoming fulfilled, only now is my thirst for belonging, knowledge, and understanding, being satisfied. It all began two years ago, when my dear mother, of blessed memory, passed away. I began to search for a synagogue where I could enshrine the names of my beloved parents on memorial plaques. I was fortunate to find Congregation Machane Chodosh which provided not only religious guidance and services, but personal warmth and compassion, as well. With the help of Rabbi Manfred Gans, I was guided onto the first step of my journey. For the first time in my life, I was encouraged to study, to learn and to participate. The National Jewish Outreach Program provided the classes for which I had thirsted so many years. I now study Hebrew, Siddur and Chumash, Judaics and Jewish History, and I love every minute that I am in class! I also attend a Shabbat morning class and a Beginners Service.

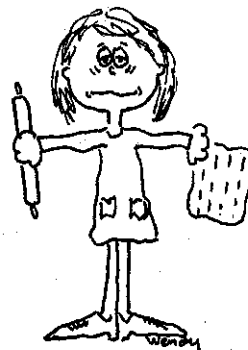
And so, like our ancestors in the story of Pesach, I have left bondage behind, and I am no longer a wandering Jew in the desert of ignorance. Instead I am approaching the fertile land of Jewish commitment and Jewish knowledge, which holds for me the promise of freedom and pride.

Helene Frank is a retired schoolteacher who is a member of the Beginners Program at Congregation Machane Chodosh, Forest Hills, NY.

WHY THE FESTIVAL OF MATZOT (cont. from p. 1)

the explanation for our eating matza on Pesach: "Because the dough of our ancestors did not have to rise..." Yet in Exodus 12:17, before the actual exodus, G-d had already commanded the children of Israel "and you shall guard the matzot" and in 12:15 "Seven days you shall eat matza. . . for whoever eats chametz shall be cut off from Israel." If the reason for eating of matza was the sudden departure from Egypt and the consequent lack of time for the dough to rise, how could the commandment to eat matza have been issued the night before the exodus?

The matza, must therefore represent something more than meets the eye, and its message must correspond to some fundamental ideas of Pesach. How is the matza produced? Since bread rises by itself when the dough is left alone, the very production of matza requires an active and careful intervention in the process of fermentation. Only the watchful eye of the baker prevents the dough from following its natural course, to make certain that it becomes a matza instead of regular bread. Bread, therefore, represents the normal course of nature, while matza is emblematic of the interruption of the natural process by a force above nature.



GO AHEAD, CONVINCE ME THAT THIS IS G-D'S BREAD!

The experience of the Exodus has a similar dialectic. For people accustomed to the worship of nature, and living in a climate where the forces of nature seem inexorable and imperturbable, the entire experience of Israel leaving Egypt represented the disruption of the natural order. The plagues had as their fundamental message the idea that there is a force above nature, that it is free from nature's laws and that it actually controls its processes at will. Thus, the production of matza prior to the holiday and the eating of matza during Pesach are a most appropriate symbol of the basic message of the Exodus. This idea is actually captured in Shemot 1 "For with a mighty hand, G-d took you out of this place. And you shall not eat hametz." The connection between

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WHY THE FESTIVAL OF MATZOT? (cont. from p. 2)
the "mighty hand" meaning the display of a Divine power
ove nature and the obligation to eat matza, is that the
latter is a symbol of the former.

The course of Judaism in history has been the spreading of the idea that there is something that transcends nature, a creation and a Creator that infused purpose into the cosmic order. Against the pagan conception of the human being as a slave of nature, the Torah posits the idea that the human, to the extent that he/she associates with the Creator, is above nature and has, within certain conditions, the power to control and master the natural order.

The message of Pesach and its powerful presentation of G-d as the main Actor in the universe, totally unencumbered by any limitations, is thus best reflected in the matza. It is therefore understandable that the festival should bear the name, Hag Hamatzot. May our celebration of Pesach lead us to the full realization of the power of Hashem in our lives, and the power inherent in us to gain mastery of the world, with the help of Torah. Hag Kasher Vesameach!

Rabbi David Algaze is the Rabbi of Havurat Yisrael in West Hills, NY and is a pioneer in the field of outreach.

AND GET YOURSELF FREE (cont. from p.1)

importantly, I know what it is to experience it on a consistent basis. From the outside looking in, it seems that the 39 laws related to keeping Shabbat are restrictive and confining. Allow me to illustrate.

Imagine, if you will, looking at the outside of a house. From a distance, the paint appears yellowed, the windows look dirty, and the house looks barely livable. Walking closer, you discover that the paint is new and the windows are frosted. You try to peer inside, but are unable to see what lies beyond the frosted panes. When you finally open the door and step inside, you discover that the house is really a beautiful mansion filled with luxurious furnishings, wonderful Epicurean delights, and an atmosphere of total peace and contentment.

This is Shabbat. From the outside, Shabbat might look less than appealing. However, as one approaches, the appearance improves. Like the house, however, it is impossible to see all that is contained therein without actually dwelling inside. And, once inside, it becomes difficult to imagine life without Shabbat.



Over the past few years, a number of things have become obvious to me. First, in this frenetically-paced and busy world, Shabbat provides an opportunity for quality family time. Second, Shabbat requires that the world come to a halt for one day, and allows a person an opportunity to rest. Third, to celebrate Shabbat, one should enjoy wonderful meals. Fourth, because of this one day of total rest and relaxation, the other six days become far more productive.

By Friday noon, I am usually ready for sundown and begin to anticipate its coming, and with it, the things noted above. For those who have not experienced this aspect of Shabbat, it might be a little difficult to get past the not driving, no television, not working in the yard, or other typical non-Shabbat Saturday activities. How do we stop thinking about business? What about cooking? What about entertainment? What about all the other things that one might miss?

Rule Number One: It's Shabbat, you can't do anything about those things anyway, so you might as well forget about them! Employing the above mentioned metaphor, this is definitely an "inside-the-house" experience. It is impossible to imagine what it feels like to let go of everything for one entire day. It can only be grasped, understood, and appreciated through experience. Once experienced, however, it becomes very addictive.

Rule Number Two: The earlier one prepares for Shabbat, the better. Usually, my family and I plan our Shabbat meals on Wednesday and do all of the cooking on Thursday night. That way there is nothing to think about as sundown approaches on Friday, except getting ready for Shabbat.

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AND GET YOURSELF FREE (cont. from p. 3)

Rule Number Three: Once Shabbat arrives, leave everything else behind. All will still be there when Shabbat is over. Several hours before Kabbalat Shabbat, I begin to get ready, take an extra long shower, spend a little more time and effort on personal grooming, put on fresh clothes and my Shabbat suit, and begin to relax and make a gentle transition from the hustle and bustle, to peace and relaxation. At 18 minutes before sundown, Sarah, my wife, lights the candles, recites the blessing, and we spend two or three minutes thinking about the previous week, the things we are thankful for, and the blessings Hashem has bestowed upon us. Shortly thereafter, I go to synagogue to daven.

One of my favorite Shabbat delights is the walk home

from shul. It is always at a leisurely pace. After all, who is there to hurry about? It's dark out, and the world seems a little different, more relaxed somehow. In those moments, I know that there is a wonderful loving family, and a delicious meal waiting for me at home. Most of all, I know that for the next 24 hours, I don't have to do anything but rest, be at peace with myself, spend time with my family, my friends, and Hashem, and to do nothing but "get myself free."

Patrick Mazor is a successful business-person, writer, and lecturer. With his return to Judaism, he invests time writing and speaking about how to experience the joy and wonder of an observant life. Patrick, his wife Sarah, and their son Aaron live in New York City.



Illustrations by Wendy Klein Dunn



Bereshith: "In the Beginning" is edited under the direction of Beryl Levenson and Amy Gugig of the National Jewish Outreach Program, Inc. Special Beginners Services are conducted at synagogues throughout the United States to introduce those with limited backgrounds to the beauty of the traditional Hebrew service. For more information regarding the Beginners Service closest to your home, to establish a local Beginners Service, or to learn more about programs of the NJOP, please write or call: 485 Fifth Avenue, Suite 701, New York, NY 10017, (212) 986-7450.

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