

Small Batch, Artisanal Flatbread: DIY Judaism and the Future of Jewish Practice

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In the family of David Olivestone, a member of the editorial board of the OU who now lives in Jerusalem, *minhagim* have always been important. His father was meticulous in his performance of customs that had been handed down to him from *his* father, a Torah scholar who served as Rabbi/chazzan/shochet/mohel and teacher in small communities throughout England and Wales in the early 20th century. In the most recent issue of Jewish Action¹, Olivestone relates that many of his family's *minhagim*, like many *minhagim* in general, have sources in traditional Jewish texts, but there was one practice for which he could not find any source at all. It was the family custom his father always fulfilled when searching for Chametz on the night before Pesach. Like everyone else, he would place pieces of bread and search assiduously for leftover Chametz while retrieving the pieces he had carefully laid out. But there was one more thing

¹ <https://jewishaction.com/religion/shabbat-holidays/passover/the-mystery-of-the-half-a-matzah/>

he did unique to his family: he always put half a matzah in the bag along with the Chametz, to be incinerated the following morning. When David inquired of his father about this custom, the only response he ever received was, “That’s what my father did.”

Two generations earlier, his father’s maternal grandfather was a man named Reb Zelig Siemion. He was born in Warsaw in 1856 and moved to Antwerp in 1904 with his wife Soroh Leah, and later to England in 1914. His home was known as a shelter for homeless refugees, none of whom was ever refused hospitality. His life was cut tragically and violently short on the 21 Elul 1940, when the shelter he was hiding in was hit by a German bomb during an air raid. Reb Zelig’s loss was keenly felt in the family, especially around Pesach time, because in the attic of the Siemion home, Reb Zelig had an oven and would bake matzah for the entire family annually, before Pesach. A few weeks before Pesach last year, David Olivestone went to Meah Shearim to purchase shemurah matzah. As he was wrapping David’s package, the baker told him that he had not removed Challah from that batch of matzah, but that there was a fix for this oversight. All he had to do, the baker told him, was to burn half a matzah with the chametz.

David looked non-plussed, but as he left the matzah bakery, he experienced an overwhelming “Aha moment.” The baker had inadvertently provided him with the reason for the family custom! No doubt Reb Zelig also didn’t take Challah when he baked his matzah (which, apparently, were so hard

they were capable of breaking a person's teeth), so *he* would also burn his challah, in the form of half a matzah, together with the Chametz! This was how it became a family *minhag*, with the original reason lost along the way.

This is a cute story- whimsical, even. A mysterious family custom is revealed to be eminently sensible all along! But I believe this story is actually quite tragic, even ominous, as it provides us with a sobering glimpse into the Jewish future.

Erev Pesach Matzah

In order to understand why, I'd like you to turn to advertisement on last page of your source sheets. It's an advertisement for the Kerestir Matzah Bakery, one of the busier Matzoh bakeries in Boro Park, Brooklyn. As you can see, you have an array of choices. Regular hand shemurah for \$29 a pound and whole wheat for \$30- believe it or not, these are actually reasonable prices. Then, you have the opportunity to purchase "Erev Pesach matzos" at 6/\$75, calculated at the mind-boggling figure of \$12.50 a matzah! What is Erev Pesach matzah, and why is it so expensive?

The Talmud (Pesachim 38) points out that while Matzah is most readily identified with Pesach, there are other times when it is required as well. Certain sacrifices, such as the Todah, or thanksgiving offering and the atonement offering of a Nazirite, are also accompanied by Matzah. The

Talmud stresses, however, that the matzah that is baked for the purposes of the Nazirite or Todah offerings cannot be used for the purpose of the mitzvah of matzah, because that matzah must be baked *lishmah*, for the *mitzvah*. If it is baked to fulfill the obligations attendant to a different sacrifice, or because you wish to bake small batch, artisanal flatbread, you have not fulfilled the obligation and you cannot use it for this purpose. Indeed, in every matzah factory, the bakers declare loudly the phrase *leshem matzos mitzvah*- for the purpose of matzos to fulfill the mitzvah- at each stage of the baking process; when the specially guarded water is added to the specially milled flour, when the dough is kneaded, rolled into its distinctive shape and punctured , and then again when the matzah is placed in a blisteringly hot oven for a minute or so.

Note that the Talmud only speaks about the *intent* required for baking Matzah, and not about *timing*. It is not until the days of the Geonim, at the beginning of the second millennium, that we find any reference to it. During this time, the practice developed that matzos for the Seder would be baked on Erev Pesach itself after the sixth halachic hour of the day, by which time all the Chametz had been eaten, incinerated and nullified. The earliest reference to this practice can be found in the writings of Rav Hilai Gaon, one of the leaders of the Talmudic academy in the Babylonian town of Sura in the eighth century CE. Rav Hilai makes reference to this practice almost

as an aside, in his description of the laws of Erev Pesach that falls on Shabbos (this will happen again in the secular year of 2021). While that Shabbos is technically not Pesach, many of the preparations that normally take place on Erev Pesach are moved up to Friday. Rav Hilai Gaon writes:

שכך שנינו: י"ד שחל להיות בשבת מבערין את הכל מלפני השבת ואופה לו מצה בערב שבת

When the 14th of Nissan falls on Shabbos, we destroy all the Chametz before Pesach, and bake the Matzah on Friday (i.e. erev Erev Pesach).

The Tur concludes by offering support from Rav Hai Gaon for the practice of baking matzah on Erev Pesach.

ורב האי כתב מנהג אבותינו לבער חמץ מע"ש ולאפות מצה וגדר גדרו קדמונינו שלא לאפות מצה מע"ש

שלא יבא לידי איסור וכמ"ש אופין מצה כתקונה ואנו אין לנו אלא מנהג אבותינו לאפות מע"ש ולא לטרוח

בי"ט ולאחר אכילת מצה אלא זריזין מקדימין למצוה ע"כ

Rav Hai has written that the practice of our forefathers has been to burn the Chametz on Friday and bake the Matzah at that time. Our forefathers erected a fence not to bake matzah on Erev Shabbat so as not to transgress a prohibition- as he writes, "we bake matzah in the normal fashion." We, however, only have the practice of our forefathers to bake matzah on Erev Shabbat and not to busy ourselves with this on Yom Tov and delay the eating of Matzah, so that those with alacrity will be able to perform the mitzvah."

In other words, Rav Hai Gaon baked Matzah before Shabbos when Erev Pesach fell on Shabbos, despite his awareness of the divergent practice in which one still did not bake matzah on Friday.

What is the rationale behind the refusal to bake on Friday? If the concern is that one might create more Chametz, it is still entirely permitted to consume Chametz on that day! Rav Yehudai Gaon offers a cryptically worded explanation:

שום מראית העין, שנראה הוא כמכין שבת ליו"ט

It appears as though he is preparing Shabbos for Yom Tov.

A simple translation here does not explain well what he means, and for this, Rav Yosef Karo, the Beit Yosef, clarifies. The concern is that if you see a Matzah on Motzei Shabbos that has already baked, you might assume that it had been baked *on Shabbos*, as the common practice was to bake Matzah on Erev Pesach itself.

Let's pause for a moment to realize the underlying assumptions of these various opinions. The first assumption is that Erev Pesach *is* the proper time to bake matzah. When Erev Pesach fell on Shabbos, people either delayed or preempted their matzah baking, doing so either on Friday or first thing on Saturday night, *before the Seder began*. The second assumption was that

everyone *knew how to* bake matzah, and had the facilities to do so. They didn't have special Matzah bakeries like we do, that are in operation for months before Pesach; they baked it in their own homes.

If Matzah can be baked with the proper intent at any time, why should it be baked on Erev Pesach in particular? Rav Yaakov ben Asher in the Tur (Orach Chaim 458), offers two potential explanations:

דאיתקש לפסח וכיון דפסח אינו נשחט אלא מו' שעות ולמעלה אף מצה כן אבל רבינו אליעזר הגדול ור' שמואל הכהן התירו אך לכתחלה יש ליזהר משום חביבה מצוה בשעתה

The first view is that since the Korban Pesach, the paschal sacrifice, was prepared and slaughtered from the sixth halachic hour of the day onward, matzah should be prepared at this time, *and only* this time. The second view is that while matzah can be baked at any time, it is optimal to bake it on Erev Pesach, because that is the ideal time for the performance of the mitzvah. Indeed, a Rishon named Rabbi Yehuda HaKohen held that everyone who observes a second Seder should bake matzah for it *before the second Seder*- because a mitzvah is best performed at its ideal time.

We mentioned that there is no reference to the timing of matzah baking in the Talmud. But there is only one *siman*, one chapter in the Tur and Shulchan Aruch, with one law in it about the proper *time* to bake matzah- because it was plainly obvious when it would occur.

שולחן ערוך אורח חיים תנח

מצוה ללוש המצה בערב פסח ובו סעיף אחד:

נוהגים שלא ללוש מצת מצוה בערב פסח עד אחר שש שעות שהוא זמן הקרבת קרבן פסח ובי"ד שחל להיות בשבת לשין בערב שבת אחר שש שעות:

THE COMMANDMENT TO KNEAD THE MATZAH OF THE EVE OF PESACH: ONE SECTION It is customary to not knead Matzot Mitzvah on the eve of Pesach until after the sixth hour, as this was the time when the Pesach offering was offered. When the 14th [of Nissan] falls out on Shabbos, one should knead on the eve of Shabbos after the sixth hour.

Indeed, the Mishnah Berurah struggles mightily to explain why only a few individuals these days bake matzah on Erev Pesach, which it is so clear that that is the correct way to do it. After searching through later halachic works, he offers two potential justifications. The first- that even on Erev Pesach, the smallest amount of Chametz renders the dough invalid (as opposed to other times before Pesach, where the Chametz is nullified). Since it is exceedingly difficult to find all the kernels of wheat that might have risen, we bake *before* Erev Pesach, so the Chametz will be nullified.

משנה ברורה שם

(ג) עד אחר וכו' - ועיין לקמן בסימן ת"ס ס"ג מה שצריך ליזהר הלש בזמן איסור חמץ. והנה רוב ישראל אין נוהגין ליזהר אפילו במצת מצוה ללוש בע"פ כ"א איזה מהם וחפשתי באחרונים ומצאתי בבגדי ישע טעם להליץ בעד המנהג מפני שיש כמה דעות שאפילו בע"פ במשהו כאשר מבואר לעיל בסי' תנ"ב וזה

קשה לזהר שלא ימצאו אף משהו חמץ בהחטים שלא יהיו מצומחים וע"כ אופין מקודם כדי שיתבטל החמץ. ובמאמר מרדכי מצאתי שכתב ז"ל האידנא מקילין הרבה בדבר מפני הדוחק זולת קצת שנזהרין בזה ללוש ולאפות אחר שש המצות שיוצאין בהם בשני הלילות וכן ראוי לעשות:

The second reason he provides is that the pressure inherent in this situation means that fewer people decided to be involved with it. It should be pointed out that even the Mishnah Berurah seems to be assuming laypeople are baking the Matzos, and that their extreme caution about the prohibition of Chametz is what led them to stop doing so regularly *on Erev Pesach*.

Nowadays, Erev Pesach matzos are a commodity and an experience that people rarely partake of, one accompanied by a great deal of pageantry. Whether baking in a commercial or smaller, private matzah bakery, people gather on Erev Pesach in the afternoon, often already dressed in their Yom Tov finery. The entire process of baking takes place while the participants sing Hallel together. What was once the standard for matzah baking- indeed, what was once considered the *only acceptable way* to bake matzah- has become a product and a privilege for which people are willing to pay an astonishing premium. The Mishnah Berurah's justifications aside, how has a practice that was once standard become so rarefied? What is so special about baking matzah in this way, that people are willing to pay such exorbitant sums for the product- or the experience?

Another Reason

Not only is it uncommon for people to bake Matzah at the proper time on Erev Pesach anymore- it is rare for people to bake their own matzah, period. This is especially concerning, because baking our own matzah may be equally integral to the mitzvah.

The Talmud in tractate Pesachim interprets the Torah's description of Matzah as *lechem oni*, the bread of poverty or affliction, as bread that is baked in the the same manner that poor people bake their bread.

תלמוד בבלי מסכת פסחים דף קטו עמוד ב-דף קטז עמוד א

דבר אחר: לחם עני - עני כתיב, מה עני שדרכו בפרוסה - אף כאן בפרוסה. דבר אחר: מה דרכו של עני - הוא מסיק ואשתו אופה, אף כאן נמי - הוא מסיק ואשתו אופה.

Alternatively, in the verse, “leḥem oni” is actually written without a vav, to read *ani*, 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. Alternatively: Just as the manner of a poor person is that he heats the oven and his wife bakes quickly, before the small amount of wood they have is used up, so too here; when baking matza, he heats the oven and his wife bakes quickly so the dough doesn't rise. This is why matzah is called the poor man's bread.

רא"ש מסכת פסחים פרק ב

...ורב כהן צדק ז"ל כתב לצאת ידי חובה בלילה הראשונה אינה אלא במצה שאפאה ישראל לשם מצה שנאמר ושמרתם את המצות עד שתהא משומרת לשם מצה. ורב האי גאון ז"ל כתב מצה שאפאה נכרי לפני ישראל על ידי שימור כתקונה מותרת לישראל לאוכלה. ובעלי מעשה וחסידים והתמימים מחמירין על עצמן כגאונים המחמירין ולשין ואופין בעצמן כהיא דאמרינן מה דרכו של עני הוא מסיק ואשתו אופה:

Rav Asher ben Yechiel writes that those who are pure of action and righteousness are stringent to knead and bake the matzah themselves, thus fulfilling the Talmud's directive that "just as a poor person feeds the oven and his wife bakes, so too we should stoke the oven while our wives bake." In other words, baking the matzah by ourselves is the optimal fulfillment of the *mitzvah* of matzah because this is the most faithful fulfillment of the *theme* of Matzah. This is one reason why I think David Olivestone's story is tragic; he could not decipher his family's custom because his experience with baking matzah was limited to stopping at a matzah bakery well before Pesach and purchasing some; it is likely he was unaware of some of the basics of matzah baking, like taking challah, that might have provided insight into his own family's venerable tradition. At least he lives in a place where one can easily visit a matzah bakery. Those of us who live in Dallas, who purchase our matzah from a store or online, have no opportunity to bake matzah on our own, and no idea what happens in a matzah bakery.

Being a Competent Jew

It is tempting to relegate the importance of engagement in a visceral, hands-on, tactile mitzvah experience to Pesach alone, but this would be a mistake. Perhaps you have seen it on the shelves of a certain kind of person. It's an oversized red volume, whose pages are by now undoubtedly yellow; the book is an artifact of Jewish hippie culture most likely found in a home that also featured macrame plant hangers². The book is *The Jewish Catalog*. First published in 1973 and then in two subsequent editions, it was the Jewish version of the 1960's counterculture manifesto "The Whole Earth Catalog." It embraced the earthy zeitgeist of that period and strove to be the address for all matters related to "doing Jewish." Like the Whole Earth Catalog, the illustrations in the Jewish Catalog depicted people with long, wavy hair and peace-sign shirts sitting on the ground with a blissful expression, but in this book, they sat on the ground in a Sukkah. The book was divided into four mystically titled sections; "Space," "Time," "Word" and "Man/Woman," each section more or less correlating with a category of essential Jewish practices you could learn how to do: how to crochet a kippah, how to make your own paraffin candles, how to make a Shabbos meal for 35 people or how to make a shofar.

"STEP 1: Boil the shofar in water for at least two hours and probably as long as five.... The cartilage can be pulled out with the aid of a pick. If the horns are small, the cartilage can be removed in about half an hour."

² <https://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-arts-and-culture/books/939/do-it-yourself>

No book had ever been published like it before; it created something of a revolution in awakening interest in Jewish practice and what might be called “Do It Yourself Judaism.” But after three editions, it has never been published again, a reality that I believe is directly related to the price and rarity of Erev Pesach Matzos: DIY Judaism has been dying the death of a thousand cuts for decades. This is unfortunate, and frightening, for several reasons.

It is clear from many sources that familiarity, personal engagement and competence in mitzvah performance is an essential part of being Jewish. The Talmud places a high value on ritual competence on the part of *every* Jew, and therefore makes a shocking assertion:

חולין ט עמוד א

ואמר רב יהודה אמר רב תלמיד חכם צריך שילמוד ג' דברים כתב שחיטה ומילה ורב חנניא בר שלמיא משמיה דרב אמר אף קשר של תפילין וברכת חתנים וציצית ואידך הני שכיחן

§ And Rav Yehuda says that Rav says: A Torah scholar is required to learn the requisite skills to perform **three matters: Writing**, so that he will be able to write texts on various occasions, **ritual slaughter, and circumcision**. And Rav Ḥananya bar Shelamya says in the name of Rav: He must also learn to

tie the knot of the phylacteries, and to recite the blessing of the grooms by heart and with the traditional intonation, and to tie ritual fringes to the corners of a garment. The Gemara notes: **And the other *amora***, Rav Yehuda, holds that **those skills are commonplace** and do not require special training.

ואמר רב יהודה אמר שמואל כל טבח שאינו יודע הלכות שחיטה אסור לאכול משחיטתו ואלו הן הלכות
שחיטה שהייה דרסה חלדה הגרמה ועיקור

§ **And Rav Yehuda says that Shmuel says:** With regard to any slaughterer who does not know the *halakhot* of ritual slaughter, it is prohibited to eat from his slaughter. **And these are the *halakhot* of ritual slaughter:**

Interrupting the slaughter, **pressing** the knife, **concealing** the knife under the windpipe or the gullet in the course of an inverted slaughter, **diverting** the knife from the place of slaughter, **and ripping** the *simanim* from their place before cutting them.

If you take this statement to its logical conclusion, it means that many Jews who are deeply learned- among them many remarkable Torah scholars and revered Rabbis- do not cross the Talmudic threshold for Torah scholarship. In the times of the Talmud, being a learned Jew meant being a ritually competent across an array of Jewish disciplines. This is why a lack of familiarity with the procedure for baking matzah should be a wakeup call for us. Our sages did not just want us to be competent in mitzvot on a

theoretical level; they wanted us to actually perform the mitzvos, not outsourcing them to others. A short Talmudic phrase encapsulates this ethos: מצוה בו יותר מבשלוcho - A mitzvah is better performed by a person than his agent.

The source for this principle is in the Talmud (Kiddushin 41), which discusses who may participate in the act of kiddushin:

מתני' האיש מקדש בו ובשלוcho האשה מתקדשת בה ובשלוcho האיש מקדש את בתו כשהיא נערה בו
ובשלוcho

MISHNA: A man can betroth a woman by himself or by means of his agent.

Similarly, a woman can become betrothed by herself or by means of her agent. A man can betroth his daughter to a man when she is a young woman, either by himself or by means of his agent.

A man does not need to be present to betroth his wife, so long as he has duly appointed an agent. Indeed, the woman does not need to be present either- his agent for betrothal can give the ring, the money or the document to *her* agent who is acting on her behalf. The Talmud then asks an obvious question: If a man is permitted to appoint an agent to betroth his wife, certainly *he* is allowed to betroth her himself; is there a need to tell us that a person can betroth his own wife? The Talmud answers that while it is

permitted to appoint another person to betroth one's wife, it is *better* to do so oneself.

גמ' השתא בשלוחו מקדש בו מיבעיא אמר רב יוסף מצוה בו יותר מבשלוחו

*The Gemara starts by questioning the need for the seemingly extraneous halakha stated in the mishna: **Now** that the mishna stated that **one can betroth** a woman **by** means of **his agent**, is it **necessary** to state that a man can betroth a woman **by himself**? Rav Yosef says: The mishna writes both halakhot to teach that although the betrothal is valid either way, it is **more fitting** that the **mitzva** be performed **by** the man **himself than by** means of **his agent**.*

Why, indeed, is it better for a person to betroth his own wife? Yes, it is always more romantic to be present at your own wedding, but the outcome is the same whether you show up yourself or appoint someone in your stead!

Rashi explains:

רש"י

מצוה בו יותר מבשלוחו - דכי עסיק גופו במצות מקבל שכר טפ"י:

If you are involved in your own mitzvah performance, you will receive greater reward. Tosfot R"i Hazaken expands this to every mitzvah:

Daf al Daf to Talmud Bavli Masechet Kiddushin 41

וכן מדוייק כאן בתוס' ר"י הזקן (על הדף) שכ' בזה"ל, מצוה בו, כל מצוה שמוטלת עליו יעשה בגופו ולא ע"י שליח, עכ"ל.
Whenever there is a mitzvah you can perform yourself, you should not outsource it to an agent.

A relatable example of this principle is found in connection with Shabbos preparation.

שולחן ערוך אורח חיים הלכות שבת סימן רנ סעיף א

ישנים בבוקר ביום ששי להכין צרכי שבת, ואפילו יש לו כמה עבדים לשמשו ישתדל להכין בעצמו שום דבר לצרכי שבת כדי לכבדו, כי רב חסדא היה מחתך הירק דק דק; ורבה ורב יוסף היו מבקעין עצים; ור"ז היה מדליק האש; ורב נחמן היה מתקן הבית ומכניס כלים הצריכים לשבת ומפנה כלי החול; ומהם ילמד כל אדם, ולא יאמר: לא אפגום כבודי, כי זה הוא כבודו שמכבד השבת. הגה: ויש להשחזי הסכין בערב שבת, כי זהו מכבוד השבת שמכין עצמו לאכילה (כל בו וב"י בשם ספר ח"י עולם).

A person should be arise on friday early to prepare for shabbat; even if he has many servants to serve him he should find something small to do. We see this with Rav Chisda who would cut vegetables finely; Rabah and Rav Yosef, who would chop wood; Rabbi Zeira who would light the flame; And Rav Nachman, who would clean the house and replace the weekday cutlery with cutlery designated for Shabbat. We can emulate these people and one should not say: "It is unbecoming of me," for this is the honour of shabbat.

Rama: Additionally one should sharpen his knife to ease eating.

Each of the Rabbis described here demonstrated their honor for the Shabbos by preparing for it themselves, despite the readiness of others to do it for them. Rav Avraham Abba Gombiner takes applies these actions to mitzvos in general:

מגן אברהם סימן רנ"ס"ב

להכין בעצמו - וה"ה בכל מצוה מצוה בו יותר מבשלוחו:

What is the Mitzvah here? This is preparation for Shabbos, not Shabbos itself! The Mishnah Berurah explains that it is the mitzvah of *kevod Shabbat*, of honoring Shabbos, which is incumbent on each and every person.

משנה ברורה סימן רנ"ס"ג

(ג) להכין בעצמו וכו' - דמצות כבוד שבת מוטל על כל אדם וכדכתיב וקראת לשבת עונג לקדוש ה' מכובד [ט] ומצוה בו יותר מבשלוחו וה"ה בכל המצות מצוה בו יותר מבשלוחו...

To prepare personally. For the commandment of honoring the Shabbat is incumbent upon every person-as it is written: "And you shall call the Shabbat a delight, the hallowed to God, honored." The commandment should more properly be fulfilled by the person himself, rather than by his agent. The same is true for all of the mitzvot: with regard to them all, a commandment should more properly be fulfilled by the person himself, rather than by his agent...

Listen to the remarkable promise quoted from the Arizal by Rabbi Chaim Mordechai Margolies in his commentary *Shaarei Teshuvah* on the Shulchan Aruch:

"In the name of the "Mystical Intentions of the Ari Z"l: The perspiration that one sweats in the preparations for Shabbat is as effective in erasing one's sins as tears;

therefore one must expend a tremendous amount of energy for the honor of Shabbat..He wrote a similar sentiment concerning the baking of Matzot on Erev Pesach...”

But is it really always better to perform a mitzvah ourselves? What if someone else will do a better job of it? Think about why we hire a *mohel*... or for a less gruesome example, consider a fascinating question raised by Rav Avraham Danzig, in his Halachic work *Chayei Adam*. The final mitzvah in the Torah obligates every Jew to write a Sefer Torah. What if you are an amateur scribe, whose handwriting is adequate but not beautiful; are you obligated to write your own Torah, or should you hire a scribe to do so? On one hand, the scribe will undoubtedly write a more beautiful Torah scroll on your behalf, thus fulfilling the mandate of *hiddur mitzvah*, or beautification of the mitzvah. On the other hand, you won't have written it yourself. Per Rashi and the Tosefos R"l Hazakein, you would be forgoing either significant reward or engaging in inferior mitzvah performance if you outsource the writing of the Torah scroll. The Chayei Adam (68), however, felt both arguments are compelling and leaves the matter undecided. Rav Moshe Teitelbaum of Ujehel, in his Torah commentary *Yismach Moshe*. suggests that this entire question does not apply when you *hire* a scribe to write Sefer Torah or, in general, when you hire another person to perform a mitzvah for you. This is because because payment for

services rendered is the equivalent to performing those services oneself. Rav Dov Berish Weidenfeld, the Techebiner Rov of Jerusalem, asserts in his responsa *Doveiv Meisharim* that it is, indeed, better to hire an expert to write the Sefer Torah. First of all, the principle of *hiddur mitzvah*, the quality of the performance of the mitzvah, overrides the concern that you won't be the one doing it. Nevertheless, Rav Weidenfeld concludes that you should at least write a letter, so that you have a part in the mitzvah yourself.

Applications

These discussions- the proper time to bake matzah, doing so ourselves and whether it is appropriate to outsource the performance of a mitzvah to another person- represent a moment of truth for us, and in the spirit of Pesach, offer us four challenges.

First, these discussions about baking matzah are predicated on the assumption that we are *capable* of doing so ourselves. Our sages assumed that everyone knows how to bake matzah, and everyone does it, at earliest, on Erev Pesach or at the Seder itself. Indeed, they assumed a broader proficiency with practical mitzvah performance. Can any of us say this true about us? Can any of us identify whether their lulav is kosher or whether their *esrog* meets halachic criteria? How many men know how to tie the

knots of their Tefillin or the strings on their tallis? Shortly after my father began his Ph.D at MIT, he began cooking for himself and went to the butcher on his own for the first time, to purchase a chicken. Back then, chickens were sold unsalted, and people salted the chicken to remove the blood at home, a process known as *melicha*. My father didn't know how to perform *melicha*, so he called my grandmother, of blessed memory, and she explained to him patiently how to go about it. Nowadays, no one outside the kosher meat industry knows how to do this. Rav Nissan Telushkin, a great Chabad posek and grandfather of Rabbi Joseph, wrote a Sefer called *Taharas Mayim*, which even today remains one of the most important texts in studying the laws of constructing a Mikvah. The thesis of this Sefer is that anyone can construct a kosher mikvah of their own, in their own home, for a relatively affordable sum. Nowadays, the only building frum people engage in is of a Sukkah- and even then, they often outsource this to others; The construction of mikvaos is overseen by a very small handful of experts- maybe just a few individuals in this field worldwide. At the end of Tractate Makkos, there is a famous Mishnah- and when I say "famous," I don't just mean that it is famous because I've heard of it. It is recited after virtually every learning session at any shiva house, at any shiur and every day between Mincha and Maariv:

משנה מסכת מכות פרק ג משנה טז

רבי חנניה בן עקשיא אומר רצה הקדוש ברוך הוא לזכות את ישראל לפיכך הרבה להם תורה ומצות שנאמר (ישעיה מ"ב) ה' חפץ למען צדקו יגדיל תורה ויאדיר:

Rabbi Chanania son of Akashia stated, God wanted to grant merits to Israel, therefore he gave them many laws and commandments as it states, "Because God wants righteousness he increased the amount of Torah and splendor." ([Isaiah 42:21](#)).

In what way do mitzvos grant merits to the Jewish people? If anything, mitzvos could cause *demerits*, due to the failure to perform them! Rav Ovadia of Bertinoro offers a novel interpretation of this passage.

ר' עובדיה מברטנורא מסכת מכות פרק ג משנה טז

לפיכך הרבה להם תורה ומצות - כגון פרשת שקצים ורמשים כדי להרבות שכר כשהן בדילים מהם, אף על פי שבלאו הכי לא היו אוכלין אותן שנפשו של אדם קצה בהן:

The Torah prohibited items that we might naturally find repulsive, such as various worms, insects and rodents, so we can gain merits for avoiding them even if we would normally recoil from them regardless. Listen, though, to the Rambam's interpretation of this passage.

רמב"ם על משנה מסכת מכות פרק ג משנה טז

מיסודות האמונה בתורה שאם קיים האדם מצוה משלש עשרה ושש מאות מצות כראוי וכהוגן ולא שתף עמה מטרה ממטרות העולם הזה כלל, אלא עשאה לשמה מאהבה כמו שביארתי לך, הרי הוא זוכה בה לחיי העולם הבא, לכן אמר ר' חנניה כי מחמת רבוי המצות אי אפשר שלא יעשה האדם אחת בכל ימי חייו בשלימות ויזכה להשארות הנפש באותו המעשה. וממה שהמורה על היסוד הזה שאלת ר' חנניה בן

תרדיון מה אני לחיי העולם הבא, וענהו העונה כלום בא לידך מעשה, כלומר האם נזדמן לך עשיית מצוה ראוי, ענה לו שנזדמנה לו מצות צדקה בתכלית השלמות האפשרית, וזכה בה לחיי העולם הבא. ופירוש הפסוק ה' חפץ לצדק את ישראל למען כן יגדיל תורה ויאדיר.

Among the fundamentals of our belief in the Torah is that if a person fulfills one of the 613 commandments in the proper way and does not involve any temporal considerations whatsoever in its performance, but rather does so with pure intent out of love of God as I have explained, that person will merit a share in the world to come. That is why Rabbi Chanania says that it is the proliferation of mitzvot that leads to this outcome, for it is impossible that a person, throughout his or her entire life, will not perform at least one mitzvah in this manner.

It is easy to gain Olam Haba; all we have to do is perform mitzvos ourselves- מצוה בו יותר מבשלוחו . Yet we have outsourced so many mitzvos to others- matzah only being the most seasonally relevant example; there are so many mitzvos that are better performed by us, but that we don't know how, certainly now without expert guidance. This is an ominous warning to our community, heralding the decidedly mixed bag of widespread observance yet wholesale ignorance- and it is of our own doing. The only way to stave off Jewish incompetence is to seize every possible opportunity to involve ourselves in mitzvah experiences, developing proficiency and comfort as a result.

The second challenge for us is that our Jewish incompetence does not just bode ill for us- it bodes ill for our community. In a letter to members of Hazon, an organization dedicated to Jewish awareness of sustainability issues, founder Nigel Savage reflected on his experiences saying kaddish over the course of a year in a variety of places. Out of all the shuls he went to and all the diverse prayer experiences in which he participated, he was an especially frequent attendee at one shul in particular: the daily minyan at Manhattan's Congregation Ohab Zedek, on 95th between Amsterdam and Columbus, the epicenter of the Friday night Upper West Side singles scene. This was not a likely fit for him, as he had left Orthodoxy as a teen and harbored, by his own admission, some anti-Orthodox sentiment.

“I feel especially grateful to the Rabbi [Rabbi Allen Schwartz] and community of OZ – Ohab Zedek, at 95th and Amsterdam. OZ is round the corner from our apartment. Of the 408 occasions I said kaddish, exactly 175 were at OZ.

Reb Zalman [Schachter Shalomi, founder of the Jewish renewal movement] z”l once memorably compared the orthodox to the heartwood of the tree. The outer rings of the tree are growing and changing, each year. But holding up the tree, the literal core without which the tree would fall, is its heartwood. Reb Zalman said (to a group of the Renewal rabbis and rabbinical students) that we all depend, some or much or most of the time, upon the orthodox for mikvehs, kashrut certification, sefarim (religious books), sofrim (scribes) and so on. People who have striven to say kaddish

on their travels are often indebted to the orthodox shuls and minyanim, gabbais, attendees, who make the minyan day in and day out.”

Reb Zalman came from the Orthodox world, and taught his disciples what I think we know instinctively; that we Orthodox Jews, in all our diverse stripes, have become the group to which the rest of organized Judaism has outsourced its Jewish infrastructure. But if we Orthodox, as an amorphous entity, have become this repository, we need to recognize that we Modern Orthodox have done this as well, outsourcing competence and experience in a vast array of Jewish practices to others, leaving us personally ignorant and bereft of the wonders of significant portions of our experiential tradition. Our community, like virtually every community in North America that isn't enormous, is thirsting for talented educators of *any* kind, let alone those who identify with our values and understand our background. I have spoken often of the need for us to create spiritual, intellectual and social conditions that are fertile for the growth of educators and spiritual leaders from and for our own community. That is not just true for educators, though; it is also true for communal functionary positions as well- the kind that, if we are honest, we look down upon. The Modern Orthodox community needs to produce Modern Orthodox *tefillin* makers, Modern Orthodox Sofrim, Modern Orthodox *shochatim*, Modern Orthodox Mikveh experts and mikveh attendants, Modern Orthodox *mohalim* and Modern Orthodox kashrus professionals, all of whom will represent the

highest standards of halachic observance, communal dedication and professional integrity. If we cannot produce our own Jewish functionaries, we have no control, no agency and no seat at the table over our religious lives and no right to complain when they are handled by others who don't "speak our language."

There is a third reason why this outsourcing crisis should give us pause. It is not only revealing *that* we outsource our mitzvah performance; our *choice* of mitzvot that we outsource is also revealing. If there is one mitzvah that all of us outsource to others- experts or not- it is Jewish education. This makes sense; the Talmud talks about the importance of retaining someone to teach our children Torah if we are not capable of doing so ourselves. The Chayyei Adam's scenario, in which it might be preferable to hire a scribe to write a Torah if it will be more beautiful, is most appropriate here as well. Let us remember the words of the Tchebiner Rav; even if you hire a scribe to write your Torah, you need to write something yourself. מצוה בו יותר מבשלוcho means that the primary obligation of educating our children rests on *our* shoulders, and obligates us to be active partners in the education of our children. It means that the moral and religious lessons we teach at home must reinforce those they learn in school. It means that we must seize every opportunity to learn Torah with our children, and if they know more than we do, it means we should learn *from* our children. It means encouraging

our children to become competent Jews, and modeling for them what that means ourselves. Pesach in particular is the holiday in which this lesson is heightened, in which we are mandated *vehigadeta levincha*, to impart the experiences and the lessons of Pesach, and of what it means to be Jewish, to our children.

If the lesson of baking matzah proper time and through our own hard work is that we must become DIY Jews, that is a tall order. Is it really possible for us to be completely proficient in all the details of every mitzvah? Can we really become conversant in every area of Jewish practice? The beginning of the sixth chapter in Devarim tells us-

וְזֹאת הַמִּצְוָה הַחֲקִים וְהַמְשֻׁפְּטִים אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם לְלַמֵּד אֶתְכֶם לַעֲשׂוֹת בְּאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אַתֶּם עֹבְרִים שָׁמָּה לְרִשְׁתָּהּ:

And this is the Instruction—the laws and the rules—that the LORD your God has commanded [me] to impart to you, to be observed in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy,

The Netziv, in his commentary on this verse, questions what additional information it provides. The Netziv explains that the singular form in this verse teaches us a powerful lesson- that of the power of *one mitzvah*. Every Jew is challenged to adopt one mitzvah as our own, by owning and

immersing ourselves in it, by observing it scrupulously and making it such a centerpiece of our lives that it is practically synonymous with who we are. I opened this drasha by acknowledging my friend Rabbi Ben Skydell, and I will close it by telling you about something remarkable he did a few years ago. A few summers ago, he was teaching a seminar on halachic aspects and ethical dimensions of meat production. A number of his students professed their belief, as a result, that the only ethical way to partake of meat is to raise the animal and slaughter it oneself. Rabbi Skydell responded to his students' high mindedness by deciding to learn *shechitah*, soliciting the agreement of Rabbi Chaim Loike of the Orthodox Union to train a group he assembled. Initial inquiries in the more Yeshivish community in the Five Towns, where Rabbi Skydell was living at the time, proved fruitless. A few weeks later, he spent Shabbos in another tri state area community; sitting on the couch before lunch, he was sharing with his friend- a very typical New York area Modern Orthodox layperson- what he was trying to do and expressed his frustration that no one seemed interested in a hands-on course in the laws of Shechitah. His friend said "No problem. We'll do it." Within a day or two, a core group of similar people formed that began studying the Shulchan Aruch and a digest of the laws of Shechitah called the *Simlah Chadasha*. The Rabbis in this community all thought Rabbi Skydell was crazy; they told him this was nothing more than a learning fad with a short shelf life, because this group was hardly interested in intensive Torah

study. One person, however, encouraged him- it was an artist named Toby Kahn. “Ben,” he said, “You are the only one who understand that these guys need a tactile experience where they can work with their hands.” Toby Kahn was right, and the Rabbis were proved wrong; every participant completed the course and was granted a license to *shecht*. The Rabbi of the shul where many of these men attend told Rabbi Skydell, “Ben- I have to hand it to you. No one else in the last decade has been able to get these guys to learn, and you did it.” In fact, one of them- who actually works in a hedge fund- became so proficient and showed such impeccable technique that Rabbi Loike still brings him to demonstrate proper shechitah technique to Rabbinical and shechitah students. They became the Modern Orthodox shochatim we spoke of earlier. These men became DIY Jews not by doing everything, but by picking one mitzvah that appealed to their desire for a visceral, tactile experience- and making it their own. The laws of baking Matzah on Erev Pesach, and the assumption of Chazal that everyone knew how to do it, present us with a powerful charge that cannot be ignored. If we can’t become experts in *everything*, it does not allow us to become experts in *nothing*. What will we, as a community and as individuals, do to create more visceral and experiential connections to mitzvos? What will we do to promote overall Judaic competence in our ranks? How will we be represented among those who serve the basic religious needs of our community? What is our DIY mitzvah, the one we will make our own,

whose expertise becomes part of our identity? The Jewish world is counting on us, and our Jewish future depends on it. If we don't do it, who will?