

D'var Torah for the Last Days of Pesach

I watched with increasing dismay on Sunday last, as my d'var torah, built upon Shir Hashirim was eclipsed by *shir hasichah*, the song of conversation, about that very same book, which we heard chanted on Sunday morning. There it went, my ideas and inspiration. What was I going to do with very little time left and many different *sedarim* to attend.

And then I ran out of matzah.

The Daf of Matzah

Introduction:

In this *daf*, we will read of the two meanings ascribed to matzah during the seder.

Amud Aleph

הָא לַחֲמַא עֲנִיא דִּי אֲכָלוּ אַבְהֵתְנָא בְּאַרְעָא דְּמִצְרַיִם.
כָּל דְּכַפִּין יִיתִי וְיִיכַל, כָּל דְּצָרִיךְ יִיתִי וְיִפְסַח. הַשְּׁתָּא
הִכָּא, לְשָׁנָה הַבָּאָה בְּאַרְעָא דִּישְׂרָאֵל. הַשְּׁתָּא עַבְדִּי,
לְשָׁנָה הַבָּאָה בְּנֵי חוּרִין.

This is the bread of affliction that our ancestors ate in the land of Egypt. All those who are hungry, let them enter and eat. All who are in need, let them come celebrate the Passover. Now we are here. Next year in the land of Israel. This year we are enslaved. Next year we will be free.

Matzah opens the Maggid, the telling of the Passover story. We say that, but of course, we never really tell the story in any kind of sequential, whole, narrative. We dance in and out of various texts and songs, some from Torah, some from the rabbis. The Aramaic *Ha Lachma anya* is one of those rabbinical passages.

'Once upon a time' would be how most stories would open, but not the Haggadah. It shifts here and there, through time and space, with word and with ritual symbolic actions. The first one of the main body of the Haggadah is an act with words, that comes to set a particular tone, a tone that anticipates perhaps the central message of the seder. This matzah, we are told, which we ate in the land of Egypt, is bread of affliction, of misery, of suffering, of misfortune. It is *lechem oni*, the bread of poverty.

This is what we had to eat, this tasteless wafer of flour and water. We were starving, we were in pain, and this is what we had to eat. No delight for our tongues, no nourishment in our bellies, our bowels swelled up with it and our stomachs distended through lack of food.

Look at the breads of other poor people. Hard crusts. Spongey bases. Tasteless crunch. These are far from artisan sourdoughs and bagel we have available to us every day in our corner bakery or supermarket.

We manage with matzah – we schmear it with butter or jam, or better, with both. We mix it with eggs and make *matzah brei*. The bread of affliction is rendered into a treat; it's very moreish.

I ran out on Monday night. I could not get any more anywhere up here. I mourned this fact – what am I going to do??? I moaned this out in front of my refrigerator, full of fresh vegetables and fruits, and little pots of olives and gherkins. I whined this out in front of my freezer, bursting with gefilte fish and chicken soup, vegetables, fish, and meat.

And then I realised what this matzah was for. I had held it aloft on Wednesday night at seder with all good intentions, and then forgot that it wasn't there for my delight, but for my instruction. I was supposed to eat it, taste its tastelessness, and open up my door and my bank app to feed those who would only have matzah to eat, without butter and without jam. And it took me running out, not to realise, because I read about what is happening, but to empathise with others, to have an inkling that, as the Corona virus enslaves and takes lives, many people are running out of money to buy food to eat, even something as simple as bread, and that this matzah of affliction should awaken us to this fact and to the knowledge that, even without the Corona virus marauding through our world, there are many people without sufficient food. I ran out – but I have other things to eat. Other people run out – and there is nothing.

We begin with our experience, and we are moved to feel for the experiences of others who have not been redeemed out of their particular Egypts. It forms another, an unspoken '*k'ilu*,' 'as if.' When we eat matzah, we live through that experience of abjectness, focus on it on our tongues, and then **וְיִהְיֶה עִנְיֵימָּם בְּנֵי בֵיתְךָ** we should let our doors be wide open and the poor treated as if members of our homes.[Avot 1:5]

Amud Beit

מִצָּה זוֹ שֶׁאֵנוֹ אוֹכְלִים, עַל שׁוֹם מֵהָ? עַל שׁוֹם שֶׁלֹּא הִסְפִּיק בְּצֶקֶם שֶׁל אֲבוֹתֵינוּ לְהַחְמִיץ עַד שֶׁנִּגְלָה עֲלֵיהֶם מֶלֶךְ מַלְכֵי הַמַּלְכִּים, הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא, וּגְאָלָם, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: וַיֹּאפּוּ אֶת הַבֶּצֶק אֲשֶׁר הוֹצִיאוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם עֲגַת מִצּוֹת, כִּי לֹא חִמָּץ, כִּי גִרְשׁוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם וְלֹא יָכְלוּ לְהַתְמַהֵמָה, וְגַם צָדָה לֹא עָשׂוּ לָהֶם.

Matzah -for what reason? There was insufficient time for the dough of our ancestors to rise when the holy one, Blessed be God, was revealed to us and redeemed us, as it is written in the Torah: "And they baked the dough which they brought forth out of Egypt into matzah – cakes of unleavened bread – which had not risen, for having been driven out of Egypt they could not tarry, and they had made no provisions for themselves."

Matzah reappears here as the last of the three Gamlielian aspects of the seder, that which we must not omit from any seder. And after we mention it, we make a *brachah*, we eat it, we dip it, we make it into a sandwich. It leads us inexorably into the meal.

This is a different matzah then the one that opened the Maggid. This isn't bread we ate during our enslavement in Egypt, but rather, this is the bread that was baked in haste and grabbed as we ran for our lives, from slavery to freedom. This is joyous, celebratory bread. It may taste the same as our first matzah, but it comes with the taste of freedom and the promise that one day, we can eat it with butter. This is the bread of freedom, "that you remember the day when you came out of Egypt all of the days of your life."

When I eat this matzah, I am rejoicing in my people's deliverance. In fact, this redemption makes the taste of even unadorned matzah sweet in our mouths. Hallelu-yah. We are freed. We have moved away from the horrors of Egypt with this flat bread, and we will take it with us wherever we go because, as the Haggadah tells us, "... even if we were all wise, all women and men of understanding, all old and learned in the Torah, it is a positive commandment upon us to tell of the story of the Exodus from Egypt."

Matzah, the bread of our miserable sojourn in Egypt. Matzah, the bread of the moment of our liberty. Matzah, to remind us to feed others. Matzah, to remind us of our relationship with God the redeemer.

Matzah, at once universal and particular, leads us first out to the other, and then back to our history. Perhaps that is the right order of things. We cannot completely, truly, celebrate our own freedom when others are hungry and in need.

I hope you, unlike me, have not run out of it, and, as you eat your last sheets of matzah, taste the needs of others underneath the joy of our freedom. There is an enormous amount of work to do now and even more awaiting us in the coming years.



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