

Why your ancestors never ate matzos

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Source: Shayna Zamkaneï

Passover begins in less than a week, and many Jews are faithfully, if somewhat resentfully, purchasing square “matzos” sold in cardboard boxes.

But why?

As Aish HaTorah’s article “The Inner Meaning of Matzah” teaches us, “We bake flat, crisp matzah in order to reenact the Exodus, when the Children of Israel fled Egypt in a hurry.” Eating matzah may be, as the article’s title states, “an act of defying the laws of nature, time and history,” but not for the reasons suggested.

Our ancestors, you see, never ate “flat, crisp matzah” until the 19th century.

They ate *massa* (a more historically accurate transliteration than “matzah”). And that *massa* looked very similar to a pita.

We know this to be true for several reasons, the first of which is the “korekh” component of the seder. “Korekh,” which means to roll up or bend around, is what we are supposed to do when remembering Hillel and making the infamous “Hillel sandwich.” Since we cannot roll *massa* that is crisp, we must assume that *massa* must be pliable.

Second, the Babylonian Talmud Pesachim 7a suggests that bread and *massa* could be easily confused: “Rabbah the son of R. Huna said in the name of Rab: If a moldy loaf [is found during Pesah in a bread bin and we are uncertain whether it is bread or *massa*], if the majority of loaves [in the bin] are *massa* it is permitted [because we assume it to be like the majority].” The *massa* currently sold ubiquitously in stores, however, never threatens to grow mold, no matter how hard you foster the right conditions. Soft *massa*, on the other hand, easily does.

Third, later sources also refer to *massa* as soft, and Ashkenazi Jews cannot wash away this fact by claiming that soft *massa* was a Sepharadi custom. For example, the Rama (Rabbi Moshe Isserlis) wrote that *massa* should be made thinner than the *tefah* (around 3 inches) recommended in the Babylonian Talmud, while the Chafetz Chaim advised that *massa* be made “soft as a sponge” (Mishna Berura, Orach Haim 486). In “The Laws of Baking *Massa*,” the Shulchan Aruch deems baking to be sufficient when “no threads can be pulled from it.” Rabbi Hershel Schachter, rabbinic dean at Yeshiva University and *halakhic* advisor for the *kashruth* division of the Orthodox Union, stated clearly that there is no custom that prohibits Ashkenazi Jews from eating soft *massa*.

Today’s incarnated form of *massa* is indebted not to the sages, but to its industrial production beginning in the 1800s.

Eating *massa* that resembles a cracker needlessly transforms the Passover experience in Israel into one of exile. In any area with a significant Jewish community, there is no excuse for *not* producing or consuming soft *massoth*, as our ancestors did.

There is also no reason why the practice of “*minhag hamaqom*,” of abiding by the custom of the indigenous community, should get a backseat to a relatively modern innovation with no root in Jewish texts or most of Jewish history.

Like subscribers to the philosophy underlying the Aish article, anybody who believes our ancestors ever ate

crispy *massoth* is perverting a custom, and then reading that new custom into the Torah.

It is this tendency among some religious communities today that requires liberating.