

Motzi/Matza

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If asked why we eat matza on Pesach, most would answer, as does Rabban Gamliel in the haggadah, that it is to commemorate the fact that we were chased out of Egypt and our bread had no time to rise; it is a symbol of redemption. This explanation, though, is not so simple. A close read of the verses in Exodus shows that God actually commanded the nation to eat matza for seven days, before they actually left Egypt. Thus, regardless of whether they were chased out or not, the people would have eaten matza!! But, why?

Some suggest that the Israelites in Egypt were idolaters and thus, not really worthy of redemption God wanted them to change their ways and show that they had broken from their idolatrous practices. So he commanded them to kill a lamb, one of the gods worshipped by the Egyptians. Similarly, since idolaters normally sacrificed leavened bread served with honey, God specified that the nation break with that tradition and eat the sacrifice with unleavened bread and a bitter condiment, and so prove their loyalty to Him.

The Netziv (Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin, 1816-1893) offers a different explanation. Comparing the characteristics of bread and matza, he notes that the former requires the intervention of man into nature. Left alone, a flour and water mixture will not rise. Only with the aid of man's kneading yeast into it does it become bread. Thus, leavened bread symbolizes man's desire to control nature, and the pride and vanity that accompanies that. Matza, in contrast, represents man's dependence upon nature and God; it is but a flat piece of bread, symbol of humility. Egypt saw itself as the height of civilization, subservient to none. Through the Exodus, God proved to them and the world that really all are subservient to Him; He alone is in control of nature.

One last approach sees in matza a symbol not of redemption but of slavery. As we say at the beginning of our seders, "This is the bread of affliction that our forefathers ate in Egypt." At the very moment of their redemption, God commands the people to continue to eat matza, symbol of slavery. This would at first seem to make no sense; why command the nation to commemorate slavery as they are in the midst of living it? Perhaps, God here is sharing an important message even when free, one cannot forget that one was once a slave. One must remember the fact and – learn from it. In the haggadah, we follow the above declaration with an invitation to the hungry to, come and eat. Freedom comes with responsibility; since we know what it was like to be hungry now that we have bread we must share it with others.

Neima Novetsky teaches Bible, Prophets and Biblical Exe