

Thoughts On Pesach

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

This Torah thought is dedicated to all of our brothers and sisters in Israel. To all the soldiers manning the lonely posts and nervous on patrol, as well as those under heavy fire as we sit here and read... And to all the families whose lives will never be the same. Know that we love you, and are thinking of you. You are the reason we have a home to call our own. To quote the late Klausenberger Rebbe: ‘when you are in a place of darkness, you do not chase away the darkness with a broom. You light a candle.’

To all of you in Israel, soldiers and students, children and grandparents, who are to us an inspiration of light, may this Torah serve as one more candle to help illuminate the darkness.

There are places in this world that are so powerful, so full of meaning that they allow us to tap in to why we are really here. Such a place is Emek HaBacha, The Valley of Tears. In this valley, deep in the Golan Heights, in the Yom Kippur War in 1973, a small group of men held off the might of the Syrian Armored Corps, and saved the State of Israel. There is a power to this place, and if you listen carefully to the wind howling through the hills, you can still hear the cries of the men who fell there.

We took a group of our students there a few years ago on Israel’s memorial day. As I was sharing the story of the battle, I noticed a fellow standing off to the side watching us. You could tell from his eyes that he had ‘been there’, so I made it a point to catch him before he left. His story made a powerful impression on us all.

“ You know,” he said, “ There are heroes of this war who have never really been recognized.

“Everyone speaks of the men in the tanks who risked everything, but not all the heroes that day were in the tanks.

“In the middle of the battle, a couple of the tanks began pulling back to re-load and re-supply. We were hopelessly outnumbered and had been fighting for hours, struggling desperately to hold the line against far superior forces. 650 Syrian tanks had poured into this valley in the afternoon of Yom Kippur, and we were only one battalion, about 35 tanks. We were almost out of ammo, and our fuel was dangerously low, so this platoon commander began pulling his two remaining tanks back to re-fuel and load up on more tank shells.

“Kahalani, the battalion commander, saw these two tanks pulling back, and gave immediate orders that they should hold their ground. The young lieutenant responded over the radio that he was almost out of fuel and shells, to which Kahalani responded that if they had no ammo they should move around and make dust, along with machine gun fire. And if they ran out of fuel, they should rotate their turrets, but that they were absolutely not to pull back. The entire balance of the battle was hanging by

a thread, and if the Syrians saw a few tanks pulling back they might think it was a retreat, which could cause a rout. So the tanks stayed where they were.

“A truck driver, back at the fuel depot, hearing this on the radio, jumped on his fuel truck, drove straight into the valley, and began re-fuelling the tanks. Can you imagine? This man drove a fuel truck, loaded with gasoline, into the heat of battle, under fire, with no armor to protect him, and began refueling the tanks! There are moments when history hangs in the balance, and special individuals rise to the challenge...”

I have never looked at a truck driver in Israel in quite the same way since...

One of the central mitzvot of Pesach is the injunction not to eat any Chametz, or unleavened bread. Instead, we are commanded to eat Matzah for the entire week of Pesach. And whenever we think of Matzah (the unleavened bread) we always think of Pesach. Less known, however, is the special mitzvah of Matzah, as it appears in the service of the Beit HaMikdash (the Temple).

Regarding the *Minchah* (meal) offering in the Temple, the Torah tells us (Leviticus 6:9):

“Its’ (the meal offering’s) remainder shall be eaten...as Matzot, in the holy area. It shall not be baked with leaven (Chametz)...”

What does the prohibition of eating Chametz have to do with the sacrifices in the Temple?

Indeed, referring to last week’s portion (2:11), it is clear there is a general prohibition of offering Chametz (unleavened bread) up on the altar, though it is mentioned with the Mincha offering, because that is the meal offering where the possibility of flour and water becoming Chametz exists (unlike other animal sacrifices where no bread is offered...). So what do Chametz and Matzah have to do with the sacrifices in the temple?

Additionally, the concepts of Chametz and Matzah (leavened and unleavened bread) are introduced as a central part of the story of the exodus from Egypt, and thus are an important concept related specifically to the festival of Pesach. Is there a connection between the festival of Pesach, the Matzah (and Chametz), and the sacrifices we offer in the Temple?

And if we are already speaking of Chametz and Matzah as they relate to the temple, there is another challenging question that is worth considering.

Many of the commentaries, in their treatment of the concept of Chametz, consider it to be representative of our evil inclination; those desires that we are not successful in channeling or controlling, and which tend to bring us down. Maimonides, in fact, compares the rising of the dough to the swelling of the ego, as well as the swelling of the sexual organ, indicative of desire...

In fact, **Rabbi Alexandri** in the Talmud (Berachot 17a) would end his daily prayers with the supplication:

“Master of the Universe, You know that it is our desire to act according to your will; what prevents us from doing so? The yeast in the dough...”

Indeed this is the idea hidden in the burning of Chametz on the eve of the festival as well as the fact that no Chametz is allowed inside the Jewish home for the entire duration of Pesach. Once a year, we are attempting to rid ourselves of the aspects of our personalities that bring us down. When we clean out all our Chametz, we are attempting as well, to get rid of ‘all our stuff’...

Which makes what happens a few short weeks after Pesach all the more curious. Because fifty days later, on the holiday of Shavuot, we offer up a very special sacrifice (see Leviticus 23:17), which is, in fact, the central symbol in the Torah for the festival of Shavuot.

On Shavuot we offer up... two loaves of bread! Called the *Shetei HaLechem*, (the ‘two loaves of bread’), this offering seems to be exactly what we were trying to rid ourselves of on Pesach! So why is the same Chametz which represented evil personified yesterday, serving as the offering to G-d today?

And incidentally, if Chametz is indeed representative of our *Yetzer HaRah*, our evil inclination, which we are trying to overcome, why is this mitzvah associated with Pesach? I would have expected the mitzvah to eat Matzah (and avoid Chametz) to be given during the ten days of Teshuvah (repentance) beginning with Rosh Hashanah and ending with Yom Kippur? After all, that is a time traditionally associated with forgiveness, repentance, and the attempt to become a better person..

What, in fact, is the Matzah, and the Chametz, and how are they connected to the sacrifices in the Temple?

Rav Tzadok HaKohen of Lublin, in his *Tzidkat HaTzaddik*, alludes to an interesting question. Most people, if asked why we eat Matzah on Pesach, would most probably recall that when we finally left Egypt, bound for the freedom of the desert, we had no time to bake bread for the journey. So we had to take the dough with us, even though it had not yet risen. Hence, to commemorate this event, we eat Matzah on Passover today. Now, to be fair, this would be the correct answer, as attested to in the Torah.

The Jews, say the verses, *“took their dough before it could rise”*, (Exodus 12: 34). And the reason for this was *“because they were chased out of Egypt and they could not tarry, and had prepared no fare for the way...”* (Exodus 12: 39).

So in fact the Jews baked Matzah because they were in such a rush they could not afford the time to allow the dough to rise.

But it’s not so simple. Because the Torah also tells me, at the beginning of the same chapter (Exodus 12: 15) nearly *a week before* the Jews ultimately leave Egypt (and before even receiving the mitzvah to take the paschal lamb) that the Jewish people will have a festival on which they will eat Matzah for seven days....

So we were given the mitzvah of Matzah a week before we ever left Egypt! Why then, did we not have enough time to bake bread?

While it may be true that our departure ended up being in a hurry, without the time to bake the bread, Hashem (G-d) who knew all this in advance could certainly have arranged for some advanced challah baking! Obviously Hashem engineered such a departure because there was a message we needed to learn which is represented in the mitzvah of Matzah.

There are certain moments, suggests the *Tzidkat HaTzaddik*, when we are presented with a window, an opening to come closer to a relationship with G-d. Such windows appear all too infrequently, and remain open only briefly. In life you have to grab those moments when they appear, otherwise, you miss them.

Such was the case of the Jewish people, who had a small window of opportunity in which to leave Egypt. And make no mistake about it, we all have our own Egypt, which enslaves us in whatever shape or form, and Pesach is the festival that creates the opportunity for each of us to let go, and leave our own Egypt behind.

Hashem engineered our departure from Egypt in such a hurry to teach us that when we are given the chance to leave Egypt, we have to run to those opportunities, which so often disappear as quickly and mysteriously as they arrived.

Chametz then, represents the missed opportunity, and Matzah represents the moment at which such an opportunity presents itself, full of promise and potential.

And of course, this is the festival of Pesach in all its glory. Pesach is that moment when the Jewish people were born. Such a moment is replete with the challenge and potential of new beginnings. And that is the Matzah. Of course, if Pesach is all about potential, Shavuot, the festival associated with our receiving the Torah, our entire Jewish tradition, at Sinai, is all about achievement. Shavuot is about how we have grabbed that window of opportunity.

And of course, that is all part of the message of the sacrifices and the Temple.

When I offer a sacrifice to G-d in the Temple, what I am essentially tapping in to, is a moment of raw potential. Whatever the mistakes of the past, and however far away I have allowed myself to grow, at this moment, on the Har HaBayit, the Temple mount, I have arrived at a window of opportunity; I have the chance to come back home, (hence the name *Har HaBayit*, which really means: '*the hill that is home...*') to do Teshuvah, the Jewish word for repentance.

Indeed, Teshuvah actually comes from the root *Shuv*, to return, or come back home...Our challenge in such a moment is to grab on to it, and ensure it does not slip away.

In fact, if we consider what Chametz and Matzah really are, this idea makes a lot of sense. One takes dough, mixes it with water, and then kneads it and eventually bakes it before the dough can rise. The natural course of events, however, is that the dough will rise. So Matzah represents potential, not yet realized, and Chametz represents having arrived somewhere, and achieved something.

And of course this is exactly what the relationship between Pesach and Shavuot is all about.

On Pesach we were born as a people, and we left Egypt, much as the newborn baby leaves the womb, full of potential, but with precious little yet accomplished. On Shavuot, however, we arrived at Sinai, where we accepted the 613 mitzvot. This is the point at which we become not just a people, but also the *Jewish* people. The dough has risen, and we are ready to eat. On Pesach, we need to recognize, just as when we stand in the Temple before the altar, how humble our beginnings really are. And that is Matzah. But come Shavuot, we are ready to declare how much we can accomplish, now that we have a blueprint for what it would mean to be in partnership with G-d in the world.

If Pesach is the festival of freedom, then the message of the Matzah is that freedom is not the goal. Most of the world celebrates freedom. The celebration on Independence Day is most often about freedom. But Judaism goes a step further; because Judaism does not believe in celebrating freedom. The question is ‘freedom, for what?’ What will I do with this newfound freedom?

And Shavuot is the answer to that question. On Shavuot I demonstrate the purpose of our freedom from slavery: to serve a higher purpose, in everything that we do.

Lastly, there is another message, hidden in the symbolism of Chametz and Matzah, which alludes to a larger theme of Pesach.

When does dough actually become Chametz? After all, the minute I mix flour and water, along with the *Se'or*, the yeast (or fermenting agent) and knead it into dough, it begins to rise. So is it Chametz the instant it begins to rise? Jewish tradition actually quantifies this question as being a very defined instant. Dough becomes Chametz eighteen minutes after it begins to rise. Technically speaking, eighteen minutes’ worth of ‘rising’ is what defines dough as having risen enough to be considered Chametz.

So essentially, the difference between Matzah and Chametz is an instant. Think about it. Matzah teaches me the power and the gift of the given moment. How often do we miss the moment? How often do we take the time to appreciate the enormous potential every moment contains, and even creates? This idea is actually one of the themes of Pesach, and may well be part of the reason that the first mitzvah given to the Jewish people (Exodus 12:2), even prior to their leaving Egypt, is the Mitzvah of the new moon, and the calendar that such a mitzvah entailed. Why, after all, did we need to start our career as a people with such a seemingly insignificant mitzvah? Why not begin with Shabbat, or even Jewish ethics? What was so important about sanctifying the new moon, and setting the first Jewish calendar in motion?

Perhaps the Torah was alluding to what freedom was really all about. If you think about it, the essential difference between a slave and a free man is that it is only a free man whose time is his own. The slave cannot really appreciate the true value of time, because he does not control his own time, nor does he determine what to do with the time he is given. Only the free man has the power to choose how to spend his time. The first thing Hashem gave us as a people, was the gift of time. That was our beginning as a people, and that is part of the hidden message of the Matzah.

And of course, this too, is the message of the sacrifices in the Temple. So often we think there is just no time, or the time has passed, or even that we can never re-claim the time we have lost. We often feel trapped in time, resigning ourselves to the patterns we have fallen in to, and the mistakes that we have allowed time to ingrain in to our characters and psyche.

The Torah comes to tell us, however, that the only moment we really need to live in is the moment we are in right now.

Never mind the moment you just missed. Grab the moment you have now, because in this moment, you are beginning the rest of your life, and every mistake you ever made, every pit you ever fell in to, can all be put behind you.

Each of us, every day, has our own moments of enormous potential, just like that truck driver in the Yom Kippur war. The question is, do we rise to meet them? Do we transform those gifts into Jewish destiny? Do we change the script we have fallen in to, and become partners in an entirely new world, the world we are born in to every moment?

We do not allow Chametz on to our regular offerings, because the spirit of those offerings, especially in this place, is that we are actually not doomed to live the life we have created for ourselves just because we have become so accustomed to it. We can actually go back to our own modest beginnings, full of so much potential and holding so much promise, and begin all over again, We can be reborn into that raw power of potential every day.

And that is also why we eat this Matzah on Pesach, and not on Yom Kippur. Because it is on Pesach that we were born, as it were out of the mud of exile and the darkness of slavery. Pesach represents our ability to be in the mud, and yet see the potential of the mountains. Yom Kippur, on the other hand, we are already flying with the angels....

May Hashem bless us, this Pesach, to re-connect with our potential, as individuals, and as a people, so that one day soon, we can all dance together in the beautiful hills and valleys of Jerusalem, on our way up to celebrate the festival of Pesach the way it was really meant to be.

Chag Sameach,
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If you are interested in receiving this Parsha thought every week, feel free to email Susan at susan@isralight.org