



What Does Eating Matzah Have to Do with Social Distancing?

No Exits to Run Away from Our Selves

We are going to celebrate a very special Pesach this year- a Pesach where we can truly ask, even if we must ask ourselves, “Why is this [Seder] night different from all other [Seder] nights? All the social distancing, with its restrictions, makes us feel like we are once again slaves in Mitzrayim (from Hebrew: constriction). Just as it was in Egypt, now, the restrictions are getting harder and harder. First, we were restricted to praying only in a congregation with less than 100 people, then, only with less than 10 people, then no gathering of even a small group inside. It was only permitted to pray in a minyan 2 meters apart outside, and now according to the latest restrictions, everyone must pray at home. Echoing [Yishai Ribo's heartfelt song](#), asking Hashem, “What do you want us to learn from this? How will we know how to unify in this separation?” It seems to me that Hashem wants to strengthen us, to get ready for something very big. The first step of the spiritual preparation – for the awaited paradigm shift – is to learn to reconnect with our personal, essential selves, in order to free our souls from bondage and dependence on others, including various forms of co-dependence. When we are busy participating in diverse social settings, we may not be aware of how much we lean on other people, rather than tuning into our independent strength, leaning only on Hashem. Now, alone with our selves, it is time to shed the layers of the superficial image we project into the world, while returning to our essential selves – our soul inherently connected with the Divine. Whereas, Yishai Ribo captures the feelings of the world – of not wanting to be alone – and asking what Hashem wants from us, I will venture to answer that ‘being alone’ is exactly what Hashem wants from us, at least for the time being. It seems clear that Hashem has removed all exits and outlets, so that we can no longer run away from our selves. Hashem wants us to peel away all our exterior layers, so that each of us can be *עצמי לבד/le'vad im atzmi* – ‘Alone with myself and my essence’ (in Hebrew the word *עצמי/atzmi* means both).

Eating Matzah, Returning to Our Essence and Gaining Freedom from Excess

The message of returning to our essence is the message of the matzah. Why is the matzah called *לחם עני/lechem oni* (the bread of poverty)? Matzah is called *lechem oni* because it consists of only the bare essentials of flour and water. This contrasts with *matzah ashira* (rich matzah) which contains eggs and honey that enriches the bread. The poor person has no money, only himself and his body. Likewise, matzah has only the essential dough. It also doesn't have any yeast or leaven agent, so that the taste of the yeast won't change and add to the essence of the dough. Although, the usual outlook of the world is that money provides freedom, actually, matzah is the bread of freedom and redemption, because true “freedom is just another word for nothing left to lose.” Maharal explains that redemption can only come, when each of us becomes totally our self, without being dependent on anyone/thing else. The economic crisis happening today is making us remove all the excess materialism and return to appreciate fulfilling only our essential needs. Unlike the slave who cannot stand on his own but is dependent on his master, wealth and materialism cannot stand on its own, because it is dependent on its possessions. When the stores are closed, and even online shopping is limited, we gain independence from materialism since we can only buy our vital food and medicine. Poverty without possessions is essential for redemption, because it stands on its own. Therefore, we were commanded to eat the bread of poverty at the night of the Exodus, since the matzah has nothing but the essence of bread. Although simplicity is considered a lack in this compound world, it

is a virtue from the perspective of the World of Simplicity – the World of Truth towards which we are currently transitioning. On the night of Pesach, we eat the simple matzah because we are redeemed from this compound world, in order to enter the upper world, which is simple (Maharal, *Gevurat Hashem* Chapter 51).

Your Deeds in This World are What You Will have in the Eternal World

My friend, Chava Berg, had a profound insight on our current situation, when we are unable to buy new things because the stores are closed, and it's even impossible to order online from abroad, since the few planes that still fly only carry vitally important cargo. Having to make do with what we have, without any possibility to exchange what we've already got and what we don't like, is a parable for the World-to-Come. In *Olam Haba* (the coming world), we will find ourselves in the same situation: what we come with is what we have. There will be no opportunity for getting more, no getting what we forgot, no exchanging what we don't like. Our actions, words and thoughts, that we brought along from our lives in this world, will be all that we have forever. Hashem, in His endless kindness, is giving us our present situation of material scarcity as a stark, very powerful reminder of what will be. Just like it's no use regretting that we did not buy something, or did not go to somebody's Simcha, or go to shul when we still could, so it will be no use regretting not coming closer to Hashem. Then it will be too late to perform the mitzvot we could have done, such as learning more Torah, reciting more heartfelt prayers, being more giving and forgiving to others, and using all those wonderful talents Hashem granted us, to make this into a better world. However, today it's still not too late to serve Hashem and keep his mitzvot better, so let's intensify our service like a runner who approaches his goal.

Integrating the Message of the Matzah by Eating Matzah Every Day of Pesach

I thought I was going to write about the women's mitzvah of eating matzah on Pesach, but Hashem put different words in my fingertips. Still, I wanted to share that, although I try to stay away from bread and flour as much as possible, and prefer eating whole grains and vegetables, I've decided, this year, to try to eat matzah every day, in order to give preference to spiritual above physical benefits. I always thought that it was perfectly fine to eat the prescribed matzah on Seder night, Shabbat and on the last day of Pesach. The rest of the week, I could eat other healthier, more fiber rich non-chametz foods. Baruch Hashem, that quinoa has become accepted as kosher for Pesach, also for Ashkenazis. Although the Torah states that you must eat matzah for seven days, the Talmud explains that it is not an obligation to eat matzah except during the Seder night:

ספר שמות פרק לד פסוק יח

אֶת חַג הַמִּצּוֹת תִּשְׁמֹר שִׁבְעַת יָמִים תֹּאכַל מִצּוֹת אֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתְךָ לְמוֹעֵד חֹדֶשׁ הָאָבִיב כִּי בְּחֹדֶשׁ הָאָבִיב יֵצְאֶת מִמִּצְרָיִם:

"The Festival of Matzah you shall keep; seven days you shall eat unleavened cakes which I have commanded you, at the appointed meeting time of the month of spring, for in the month of spring you went out of Egypt" (*Shemot* 34:18).

Unlike the first night of Pesach, where there is a mitzvah to eat matzah, during the rest of the holiday, consuming matzah is an option rather than an obligation. A beraita supports [the opinion of] Rava: "Six days you shall eat matzah and on the seventh day it shall be a resting for Hashem your G-d" (*Devarim* 16:8). Just as on the seventh day [eating matzah] is not obligatory, so too the first six days [eating matza] is not obligatory ... Can it be that even the first night [eating matza] is not obligatory? It was learned from "on matzot and maror it shall be eaten" (*Babylonian Talmud, Pesachim* 120a).

Yet, the Vilna Gaon teaches that there is a Biblical mitzvah to eat matzah all seven days of Pesach. The simple meaning of this Torah verse, even when that verse is understood differently by Chazal, conveys a mitzvah from the Torah, although it is not the same kind of obligatory mitzvah to eat matzah on the Seder night. Understanding the essential message of the matzah, to return to our essential selves, without the exterior trappings, inspires us to understand the importance to ingrain this message every day of Pesach. We, women, need to integrate this message no less than men. Therefore, women are obligated in the mitzvah of matzah, since we were part of the miracle of the Exodus (we were actually redeemed in the merit of the righteous women (*Babylonian Talmud, Pesachim 43b*)).

Repairing the Family Unit

Once we have achieved reconnection with our true selves through eating matzah in isolation, contemplation and meditation, then we need to repair the family unit. With more time on hand and less distractions, we can focus on the people in the inner circle of our lives, those who are most dear to us: our spouse, parents, children and siblings. The current situation truly protects the family, making it nearly impossible for anyone to cheat on his or her spouse. Banning pre-marital sex is a natural consequence of social distancing. Children and teenagers are being kept within the protective walls of the home, without their regular outlets for getting in trouble. This situation offers the opportunity to repair the gap between parents and children. The last Shabbat before Pesach, Shabbat HaGadol, we read about repairing this gap as a preparation for “the great and awesome day of Hashem.” The last word of the haftorah also alludes to the current social distancing, where we are all, in a way, excommunicated from one another:

ספר מלאכי פרק ג פסוק כד וְהָשִׁיב יָלֵב אֲבוֹת עַל בְּנֵים וְיָלֵב בְּנֵים עַל אֲבוֹתָם כִּן אָבֹא וְהִכִּיתִי אֶת הָאָרֶץ חֵרֶם:
ספר מלאכי פרק ג פסוק כג כִּג הִנֵּה אֲנִי שֹׁלֵחַ לָכֶם אֶת אֱלִיָּה הַנָּבִיא לִפְנֵי בּוֹא יוֹם הַשֵּׁם הַגָּדוֹל וְהַנּוֹרָא:

Behold, I will send you Eliyahu the prophet before the coming of the great and awesome day of Hashem, 24 that he may turn the heart of the fathers back through the children, and the heart of the children back through their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with excommunication (*Malachi 3:23-24*).

We have come full circle. The final redemption follows the pattern of the first redemption (*Micha 7:15*). Like the first Pesach in Egypt we are confined within our homes. Just as the Kohanim were commanded, “Do not go out from the opening of the Tent of Meeting (*Shemot 8:33*), all Israel was commanded, “None of you shall go out of the opening of his house (*Shemot 12:22*)...[in order to be protected from the plague of the firstborn]. It compared the last redemption with the first redemption (Ba’al HaTurim, *Shemot 12:8*). May Hashem protect us from the current plague as He protected us from the Ten Plagues in Egypt!