



Matzah: The Bread of Freedom

As we celebrate Passover in the Jewish tradition, one element stands out among the rest as a deeply symbolic and integral component. That item is *matzah*, the flat cracker-like bread that Scripture refers to as “unleavened bread” (Deuteronomy 16:3).

We are commanded to eat *matzah* for the entire duration of Passover, seven days in Israel and eight days outside the Holy Land. It is a central part of the *seder*, the ritual meal that takes place on the first night of Passover.

In Temple times, eating *matzah* was part of the Passover sacrificial ritual, which we commemorate today by eating a modified version of what was commanded in Exodus 12:8: “to eat the meat roasted over the fire, along with bitter herbs, and bread made without yeast.”

Although comprised of the simplest of ingredients, *matzah* is a multi-dimensional element with layers of meaning. It most powerfully captures the symbolism of the Passover story by representing both slavery and redemption in the Exodus narrative. It is mainly through the *matzah* that we are able to fulfill the goal of the *seder*, which is to tell the Exodus story in such a way that each person feels as though he or she has been personally redeemed on that very night.

In this study, we will look at the different names given to *matzah* and what those names teach us. We’ll learn that *matzah* teaches us how everything in our lives – the good and the bad – are all part of God’s blessings. Like two sides of the same coin, adversity in our lives is what often leads to our greatest victories.

Appropriately, *matzah* is the last thing that we eat at the *seder* because we want the taste – and its message – to linger long after Passover has concluded.



Then Moses said to the people,
“Commemorate this day,
the day you came out of Egypt,
out of the land of slavery,
because the LORD brought you
out of it with a mighty hand.
Eat nothing containing yeast.”

EXODUS 13:3



The Bread of Affliction

When we begin the central part of the *seder*, the storytelling section called the *Maggid*, we recite the following words, while pointing to the *matzah*: “This is the bread of affliction that our fathers ate in Egypt.” This is the starting point of the Exodus story that ends in redemption.

While many people think that *matzah* became symbolic only *after* the Exodus from Egypt, because Israelites didn’t have time to allow their dough to rise, the truth is that *matzah* was a symbol of affliction and slavery for hundreds of years beforehand.

Under the harsh oppression of their Egyptian masters, the Israelites had been fed a steady diet of *matzah* instead of bread. This was intentional because it required extra effort to make *matzah* instead of bread. When flour and water are mixed together, they will naturally rise to produce bread. To make *matzah* instead, someone had to vigilantly watch the dough so that it didn’t turn into leavened bread. It had to be worked on continuously and baked immediately in order to keep the dough flat, tasteless, and unfulfilling.

This is why the *matzah* was a symbol of affliction. Instead of feeding their slaves more satisfying food to increase productivity, the Egyptians wanted to afflict the children of Israel with as much suffering as possible, and so they were fed *matzah*.

In the first part of the *seder*, we spend considerable time recalling the hardship of slavery. We dip vegetables in salt water, representing the tears that the Israelites shed in slavery. We ceremonially break a piece of *matzah* in half, consuming the first half immediately, but hiding the second half for later as a poor man might do when he does not know when his next meal is coming. Later on in the evening, we eat bitter herbs to again remind us of the bitterness of Egyptian oppression. All this is done to fulfill the main goal of the *seder* meal, which is to relive the entire Exodus story.

While we could have focused on God’s salvation alone, the Jewish sages understood that the *seder* would then be incomplete. We go to great lengths to identify and experience the affliction of Egypt as well as we can so that we can greater appreciate the miracle of salvation. As the *seder* meal progresses, we witness how that very bread of affliction is transformed into the bread of our freedom and salvation.



Do not eat it with bread made with yeast, but for seven days eat unleavened bread, the bread of affliction, because you left Egypt in haste – so that all the days of your life you may remember the time of your departure from Egypt.

DEUTERONOMY 16:3

The Bread of Humility

According to the Jewish tradition, the practice of eating unleavened bread existed hundreds of years before the events of the Exodus occurred. In fact, tradition teaches that Abraham ate *matzah* in his time, 400 years before the Passover story! This means that while the symbolism of *matzah* connects with the story of Passover, the practice of eating *matzah* and its meaning preceded the event.

So what is that significance of eating unleavened bread? According to Judaism, *matzah* also represents humility. It is low and flat like a humble person. In addition, it is simple, consisting of just flour and water; not at all fancy like many tasty and decorated leavened products. *Chametz*, leavened bread, on the other hand, represents arrogance. Bread is all puffed up and full of itself.

For one week, every Passover, our actions and attitudes reflect the symbolism of unleavened bread. Spiritually, we rid ourselves of all traces of haughtiness. We remember that God is the source of our existence, the force behind our redemption, our Sustainer and Savior. Any aspect of personal pride is nullified.

However, the significance of unleavened bread goes even further. The symbolism of pride is extended to represent all sin. The reason for this connection between pride and sin is simple. The Jewish sages taught: “One who is haughty denies God.”

Moreover, we read in Deuteronomy 8:14, “...then your heart will become proud and you will forget the LORD your God...” Pride causes a person to forget God and naturally leads him or her on a path of sin. Humility, on the other hand, keeps God in the forefront of our minds, encouraging us to stay on the path of righteousness all the days of our lives.

Another aspect of leavened bread is that even the tiniest bit of yeast or other leavening agent can contaminate an entire loaf of bread, rendering it unfit for the holiday. In the same way, even a small amount of pride can affect an entire person. Pride can, and often does, grow if remained unchecked. Passover is the time to get in touch with how much “leaven” we have allowed into our lives and to get rid of that insidious contaminant.

Once the holiday of Passover begins, we eat unleavened bread, the bread of humility, for an entire week to remind us of our true place in the world. With all our talents and achievements, we must remain humble, recognizing that everything is a gift from God.



“Celebrate the Festival of Unleavened Bread, because it was on this very day that I brought your divisions out of Egypt. Celebrate this day as a lasting ordinance for the generations to come.”

— EXODUS 12:17

Bread of Freedom

While *matzah* is referred to in Hebrew as *lechem oni*, meaning “poor man’s bread,” in a play on words, the Jewish sages also referred to *matzah* as *lechem she-onim alav harbe*, meaning “bread that we talk about a lot.” In other words, while *matzah* may start out as a symbol of hardship, the entire *seder* is a commentary on how that bread of affliction became a symbol of freedom.

Most directly, we observe that *matzah* became the bread of freedom when it was eaten on the night of the Exodus, as commanded, “...eat the meat roasted over the fire, along with bitter herbs, and bread made without yeast” (Exodus 12:8), and also because the Israelites left Egypt so quickly that there was no time for their bread to rise. However, beyond these basic elements that contribute to the symbolism of *matzah*, there is a deeper significance when we analyze the components of unleavened bread.

Unleavened bread represents the basic necessities of life. Flour and water are baked together to form a substance, that while not the tastiest, is fully capable of sustaining life. The very simplicity of *matzah* reminds us to distinguish between what we want and what we truly need.

It encourages us to embrace the freedom of knowing what we need, which helps free us from those things that we might desire. When we recognize that all we truly need is basic and easily attainable, we are free from the grasp of materialism that enslaves so many people, especially in today’s culture.

Food of Faith

Aside from being called the bread of freedom, *matzah* is also giving another related title: the food of faith. This is because *matzah* teaches us that what at first seems like our greatest curse can become the central element of our greatest blessing.

Early in the *seder* meal, we break a piece of *matzah*, symbolizing brokenness and poverty. We eat one piece, but hide the other. Later, toward the end of the *seder* meal, we take out that hidden piece of *matzah*, only now it represents freedom.

That step of the *seder* is known as *tzafun*, which means “hidden.” At that juncture in the evening, we have witnessed that there was a hidden, but good, future for the people of Israel. *Matzah* teaches us that on the other side of affliction is freedom if we are patient, cry out in prayer to God, and have faith in our future redemption.



Photo: Noam Moskowitz

The dough was without yeast because they had been driven out of Egypt and didn't have time to prepare food for themselves.

— EXODUS 12:39



Photo: JDC

With the dough the Israelites had brought from Egypt, they baked loaves of unleavened bread...

— EXODUS 12:39

Understanding Passover

Customs and rituals observed today

While many people confuse the Jewish preparation for Passover with the world-wide custom of spring cleaning, the steps we take to rid our homes of *chametz*, leavened products, is actually the fulfillment of a biblical command, and prepare our homes for Passover.

Cleaning our homes. We clean out all parts of our homes where food may have been left behind. That can mean in-between couch cushions or inside desk drawers. As a result, our homes get a thorough cleansing.

Preparing our kitchens. After being carefully cleaned, we cover kitchen countertops and any other surfaces used for food. We move stove-top grates through fire or place them in an oven, setting our ovens to the highest temperatures possible in order to burn off all remnants of food.

Preparing our kitchenware. We take out pots, pans, and dishes that have been designated for Passover use. Our regular kitchenware is set aside; some people even tape off cupboards containing non-Passover items so they will not be used by mistake. The cabinets that we do use are often labeled “Kosher for Passover.”

Checking for chametz. On the evening of the 14th day of the Hebrew month *Nissan*, the night before Passover, we engage in a ritual known as *bedikat chametz*, checking for *chametz*.

- Ten pieces of leavened bread are hidden throughout the home and then searched out by candlelight (or flashlight). When we find the 10 hidden pieces of bread and any other *chametz* that we may have discovered during our search, we place it in a bag.
- We recite a prayer that proclaims that we disown any remnants of *chametz* that we may not have found and declare that they are “like dust of the earth.”
- The next day, we burn the 10 pieces, along with any other lingering *chametz* products, in a ceremony called *biur chametz*, burning *chametz*.

At this point, our preparation is complete and on the eve of the 15th day of the Hebrew month *Nissan*, we begin our weeklong celebration of Passover, where we eat only *matzah* and unleavened products.

Preparing for Passover and ridding our homes of *chametz* is a lengthy and tedious process. However, our actions are deeply symbolic and intended to influence our hearts. This idea is best expressed in an ancient prayer that many Jews recite as they search for *chametz*: “May it be Your will, God, that You enable us to explore and search out our spiritual maladies and return in complete repentance before You.”

After the holiday is over, we switch out our Passover utensils and resume our normal eating habits, but the hope is that through these meticulous preparations and rituals, the Passover teachings will remain with us throughout the year.



Photo: JDC/Gerasimenko Konstantin

“For seven days you are to eat bread made without yeast. On the first day remove the yeast from your houses, for whoever eats anything with yeast in it from the first day through the seventh must be cut off from Israel.”

— EXODUS 12:15



Photo: JDC

“May it be Your will, God that You enable us to explore and search out our spiritual maladies and return in complete repentance before You.

ANCIENT JEWISH PRAYER

Think About It

1. **Today, the reality is that of the 7 billion people on earth, about 1 billion suffer from hunger.** How might we partner with God to alleviate their suffering and turn the “poor man’s bread” into “the bread of salvation”?
2. **Where in your life have you allowed yourself to be prideful?** How might you become more humble and aware that God is the source of all success?
3. **Nearly a quarter of the world’s population lives under oppressive regimes.** God has blessed us with freedom. How might we appreciate and take advantage of our freedom?
4. **What does it mean to be truly free – both physically and mentally?** How are free are you?
5. **Make a list of the things you want in your life. Now go through the list again and circle the things that you really need.** What are your basic necessities and what are the luxuries that you could do without? How can you “free” yourself from needing those extras?
6. **Think back on a time where what seemed like a terrible thing actually worked out for the best.** How might that inspire you moving forward?



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Apply It

1. **This spring, clean your home with the intention of spiritually cleansing your soul.** As you scrub and shine your home, pray that your soul will be purified as well.
2. **Set aside time for introspection during the Easter and Passover season.** Search out places in your life where you may have become prideful and areas in your spiritual life that need some improvement.
3. **Write down the bad habits, past mistakes, and sins that you wish to be rid of.** Burn the pieces of paper in a fire and ask God to help you view them like the powerless and disintegrated dust and ashes that you have before you.
4. **Practice humility by putting aside your own self-interests and focusing your attention on someone else.** How can you help someone else – a child, a friend, a co-worker, or a spouse – to shine?
5. **Going through a tough time?** Write down three ways you can journey through this time of affliction and arrive at one of redemption. What might it look like? How can you get there? Remember, your current situation is not your final destination!
6. **Share your story with others.** How has God brought you out of hard times? How have you seen his salvation? Strengthen the faith of others as you strengthen your own.



Photo: JDC

