



למוד

A monthly study on the  
Jewish roots of Christianity



# 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

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# The Bread of Affliction

When we begin the central part of the *seder*, the storytelling section called *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 Egyptians 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 were fed *matzah*



# Unleavened Bread – the Bread of Humility

According to 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



# 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



# Understanding the Modern Passover

## *Customs and rituals observed today*

**W**hile 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, “*On the first day remove the yeast from your houses...*” (Exodus 12:15). The following are the ways that observant Jews fulfill that 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



# 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 “poorman’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 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?



## 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.
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