

Monotheistic Matzah and Protective Pesah

“They shall eat the meat on that night, roasted, with matzoth and bitter herbs”

The first ever lean burger, is the central dish, at least verbally, at our Seder table. We all follow the Mishnaic maxim of Rabban Gamliel, which obligates us to pronounce the words פסח מצה ומרור – but there is something much deeper here. Each of the three ingredients symbolizes one aspect of the exile or the Exodus. The bitter herbs are self-explanatory, they remind us of our bitter life in Egypt, and the bitterness we have grown used to, unfortunately, in 2,000 years of exile. Things are a little more complicated with the Pesah – the pascal lamb, and the Matzah. The Mishnah explains that we eat Pesah because God skipped over the houses of the Israelites during the plague of the firstborn, and we eat Matzah because our forefathers did not have time to bake bread before leaving Egypt.

There are several problems with those two statements. Let us start with the Pesah. The traditional understanding is that the Israelites marked their doorposts with blood, to signal the Angel of Death that they are not Egyptians and therefore not included in the terrible verdict of losing their firstborn. We should wonder why was this mark necessary, when in all previous plagues similar distinctions were made without any actions taken by the Israelites.¹ If we turn to rabbinic literature, we will find a different problem. On one hand, the Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael (Pis'ha, 11) states that the mark was necessary because: משנתנה רשות למשחית לחבל אינו מבחין בין צדיק לרשע

When the destructive angel is given a license to kill, he does not distinguish between the righteous and the wicked.

On the other hand, the Talmud Yerushalmi (Horayot, 3:1) declares that:

כד אתא רחמנא למיפרק ישראל ממצרים, לא שלח לא שליח ולא מלאך, אלא הקב"ה בעצמו דכתוב ועברתי בארץ מצרים בלילה הזה

When the Merciful One came to redeem Israel from Egypt, he did not send a messenger or an angel, but rather did it Himself, as it is written: “and I shall pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will plague every firstborn in the land of Egypt”.

If God is the one administrating the plague, as the verse indicates, why would He need the mark on the doors, and how can we explain the verse upon which the first Midrash is based (12:23)?

וַיִּפְסֶח יְיָ עַל-הַבָּתִּים וְלֹא יָסֹךְ הַמְשַׁחֵת לְבָא אֶל-בְּתוּכֵיכֶם לַנֶּגֶף - *The Lord will pass over the door and not let the destroyer enter and smite your houses.*

This verse suggests that God is traveling with a “destroyer”, either an angel or the plague itself, and that when He sees the marked doorposts He will skip the house and move to the next one.

The answer to this confusion is that the root פסח has another meaning in the bible, aside from “to pass over” and as we shall see, that meaning is the primary one. That meaning is “to protect” and the verb appears in this context in Isaiah (31:5; see full explanation in endnotes).² We should read the narrative in Exodus as follows: God commands the Israelites to designate and later sacrifice a lamb or a goat. The Israelites, who cannot shake away their “slave mentality” are afraid of Egyptian retaliation. In order to cure them of their deeply rooted submissiveness to the Egyptians, God commands them to do the Pesah sacrifice in the most defiant way possible.

They are commanded to purchase the sacrifice in advance. When they slaughter it, they are not allowed to eat the meat raw or cooked in water, which they would have wanted to do so as not to provoke the Egyptians, but rather to roast it, thus producing a strong and distinctive aroma around their homes. They were also forbidden to break the bones of the animal. This prohibition was meant to prevent attempts of covering up the identity of the slaughtered animal. The most defiant act, however, was marking the lintel and the doorpost clearly with the blood of the sacrifice. All these actions were tantamount to placing bright neon arrows leading to the Israelite quarter, alongside signs saying “Here lives an Israelite. I just killed and ate your idol. Come get me!”

The Israelites were obviously terrified to do that, and God promised them that while He goes down to plague the Egyptians, He will also protect them from possible attacks by Egyptian mobs, who could have potentially blamed the Israelites, and not Pharaoh, for all their suffering. The verse cited above (12:23) should be read thus: God will protect your houses, and will not let the destroying Egyptians come into your houses and attack you.

The Pesah, then, is the symbol of the Divine protection provided to the Israelites in Egypt, but more than that, it stands for the great achievement of the enslaved people, who were finally able to take action and trust in God, overcoming their inherent fear of the Egyptians.

Now let us turn to the Matzah. In the Haggadah we read:

מצה זו שאנו אוכלים על שום מה? על שום שלא הספיק בצקם של אבותינו להחמיץ עד שנגלה עליהם הקב"ה וגאלם מיד. שנאמר: ויאפו את הבצק אשר הוציאו ממצרים עוגות מצות כי לא חמץ, כי גורשו ממצרים ולא יכלו להתמהמה וגם צדה לא עשו להם.

This well-known paragraph from the Haggada explains that the Matzah commemorates the moment of the Exodus. Our forefathers kneaded the dough, but before it had time to rise, God revealed Himself and redeemed them. This idea is supported by the biblical text: “they baked the dough which they took out of Egypt into round Matzah because it has not risen, since they were driven out of Egypt and could not delay, and were also unable to prepare provisions.”

This verse, and its interpretation in the Haggada, are very hard to understand. How could they have not been prepared? How were they taken by surprise? They were told beforehand that they

will leave Egypt that night, and they were also told, in advance, that they are going to eat matzah:

“Speak to the Israelites, tell them: on the tenth of this month take a lamb... eat the meat on that night roasted, with matzah... you shall eat it with your loins girded, your shoes on your feet, and your staff in your hands... observe the [feast] of Matzoth, for I have taken your hosts out of Egypt on that very day” (12:1-3)

We learn from these verses that the reason for eating Matzah is legal and not coincidental. The Israelites knew of the exodus in advance and were even told to eat the Matzah fully dressed for a long journey. We know that they were forbidden to take bread because otherwise they would have packed enough of it for their future journey, as any good mother or boy scout would have done. Additionally, we “know” that matzah must be prepared within 18 minutes, so how is it possible that the dough taken out of Egypt did not become Hametz?

I would like to suggest, based on my research of the history of bread and of ancient Egypt, that the knowledge of bread making in antiquity was a secret, tightly kept by none others than the Egyptian priests. In normal conditions, a mixture of water and flour does not rise for almost a full day, for which most people have no time. In the past, only the priests knew that one could save some of the leavened dough and use it as starter dough to expedite the process.

That is why the messengers who came to visit Lot were treated by their host to Matzot (Gen 19:3). It is also clear that in their previous stop, at Abraham’s tent, they ate Matzah as well, because when Abraham asks Sarah (18:6) to hurry up and make עוגות, he is not referring to cakes but to flat, round, unleavened bread. It is the same term which the Torah will later use to describe the bread of the Exodus: עוגות מצות – round, flat Matzah.

When a meal was served to Joseph’s brothers during their second visit in Egypt, they ate separately from the courtiers. The Torah explains (Gen. 43:32):

כי לא יוכלון המצרים לאכול את העברים לחם כי תועבה היא למצרים – the Egyptians cannot eat bread with the Hebrews because it is an abomination for Egypt.

The traditional translation of this verse is that the Egyptians could not dine with the Hebrews, because the latter consumed meat, and such behavior was abominable to the Egyptians. But if this was the case, the Torah should have mentioned meat and not bread, or omit the type of food altogether. Rather, we should understand the word “abomination” as a euphemism, or opposite-language, for sacred. The Torah does not want to recognize the sacred status of bread in Egypt so it calls it an abomination. The verse should be translated thus: “The Egyptians would not serve the Hebrews bread, because it was hallowed for them.”

With this new understanding, we can return to the story of the Exodus. Both verses, the one which commands the Israelites in advance to eat Matzah, and the one which says that their doughs did not have time to rise, are correct. God told the Israelites before the Pesah that they

will leave on the eve of the fifteenth and that they could only eat matzah, but that commandment referred only to the first day³. They were allowed to eat leavened bread on the following days but were unable to do so, because they did not have enough time to let the doughs rise, and had to bake them on the run as flatbreads. Stocking on bread earlier was also impossible, because that meant asking the Egyptian priests for extra portions of bread. God did not command the people to ask for bread in the same manner they borrowed gold and silver, because the bread represented Egyptian priesthood and paganism.

I believe that for that reason Hametz is not allowed on the altar and in the Temple. The insistence on unleavened bread on sacred premises is meant to clearly mark the boundaries of monotheism, and to eschew elements of paganism.

In conclusion, the symbolism of the three elements of Pesah is all-encompassing. The bitter herbs symbolize the suffering and hopelessness, the Pesah symbolizes hope, independence, and defiance of tyrants, and the matzah stands for the rejection of Egyptian paganism and adherence to monotheism. Together they delineate the trajectory of Jewish history, and encourage us in our constant journey towards a better world.

Shabbat Shalom

¹ The first three plagues, as well as the sixth and the eighth, are described as affecting only the Egyptians, and regarding the others we read clear statements: “I will set apart the region of Goshen, where my people dwell” (Swarms of insects – ערוב – 8:18); “The Lord will make a distinction between the livestock of Israel and the livestock of the Egyptians” (Pestilence – 9:4); “Only in the region of Goshen, where the Israelites were, there was no hail” (9:26); “but all the Israelites enjoyed light in their dwellings” (Darkness – 10:23).

² כְּצִפְרָיִם עֹפֹת כֹּן יִגְנוּ יְיָ צְבָאוֹת עַל־יְרוּשָׁלַם יִגְנוּ וְהִצִּיל פְּסָח וְהִמְלִיט Jerusalem, He will protect and save, פסח and deliver. I left the verb פסח untranslated because it is the key for understanding the text in Isaiah and our story in Exodus. In Isaiah, there are four words which serve as synonyms for deliverance and protection, so this must be the meaning of פסח as well. All four roots have a common significance which is to provide shelter or shade: גָּן is to shelter with one's body, as a tree which gives shade in a garden – גָּנָה. הִצִּיל means to cast a shadow with the body. פָּסַח means to hop from one foot to another, so the area under the body is protected. מָלַט – is used to describe delivering a baby or a young animal, and in both cases the mother protects the newborn with her body.

³ Mishnah Pesachim 9:5