

Many years ago, as a Bar Ilan University undergrad, I was doing research on the historical debate around the first Matzah-baking machine. **The intention of the two professors who asked me to do the research was to prove that the opposition to the machine had to do with the Industrial Revolution.** Indeed, in the rabbinical literature of the times, references were made to the miserable state of affairs in the Matzah sweatshops on one hand, and to the concern for the workers’ income on the other.

These arguments echoed those used by the proponents and opponents of Whitney’s cotton gin and McCormick combine harvester. The professors’ hypothesis seemed plausible at the beginning, but as I delved into the material I found that there were deeper, darker layers to the story.

In the first bulletin against the machine, published at the turn of the 20th centuries, 17 great scholars explained why the use of the machine is forbidden. Shortly afterwards, a counter publication appeared in which other great scholars decried the prohibition and claimed that the opponents have never even seen the machine.

I was intrigued by the contradictory arguments and decided to search for contemporary literature which will help me shed light on the nature of the machine. I knew that the inventor’s name was Israel Singer and that he was a native of Alsace-Lorraine, but his name was nowhere to be found, even in a book dedicated to inventors of his exact era and region.

I returned to the rabbinical bulletin and dug deeper for descriptions of the machine, and eventually found that the “machine” consisted of nothing more than two large rolling pins, activated manually by crank and gears. The proponents were right.

The opponents never saw the machine and had no solid arguments to present. So now I wondered how this document came to life, rife with 17 opinions against the machine. **Further investigation revealed that the whole anti-machine campaign was launched by one Rabbi Dembitzer, who in previous years was accused by the community of embezzlement and, God forbid, attraction to enlightenment (השכלה).**

It turns out that **Dembitzer** wanted to clear his name and found a great cause in the novel contraption. He sent letters to over a hundred local rabbis, of whom seventeen gave him the

desired answer. He published his bulletin, threw the European rabbis into a halakhic whirlpool, and emerged as a pious, zealous man. This story is important because all the arguments regarding machine and hand-made matzah are rooted in that first, deceptive bulletin.

When I see announcement by the descendants of one of the original opponents, **R Hayyim Halbershtam**, that we have a long standing tradition that machine baked matzah are forbidden, and that they must be round, I don't know if I should laugh or cry. I personally follow the advice of the late **Hakham Shalom Messas**, who said that he puts aside all the handmade Matzah he receives from Hassidic leaders, and enjoys the delicious machine baked ones.

So the hypothesis of the two professors was proven wrong, but I gained an insight on the history of the notorious machine, as well as on the way customs and prohibitions evolve. I also discovered, in the process of searching the history of baking machines and bread making, another interesting fact: You know the eighteen minutes allocated for Matzah baking cycles?

How we rush the production before the dough rises? Well, that time frame is closer to 26 hours. Yes, hours. And in the ancient world, that was a very well-kept secret. For most people, the daily bread consisted of flat tortilla-like concoctions, and only expert chefs knew the secret of the leavening agent, or the starter dough, taken from dough which was left to rise for over a day. And who were these experts? **Let us turn to the Haggadah:**

מצה זו שאנו אוכלים על שום מה? על שום שלא הספיק בצקם של אבותינו להחמיץ עד שנגלה עליהם הקדוש ברוך הוא 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. (סדר רב עמרם גאון, הגדה של פסח)

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.” (Ex. 12:39)

Wait! They were taken by surprise? They did not know that they are leaving Egypt that night? Didn't God tell them, several days before Pesah, that they must eat Matzah? Let us go back to the beginning of chapter 12 (3-17) and see:

דברו אל כל עדת ישראל לאמר בעשר לחדש הזה ויקחו להם איש שה... ואכלו את הבשר בלילה הזה צלי אש ומצות... וככה תאכלו אתו מתניכם חגרים, נעליכם ברגליכם, ומקלכם בידכם... ושמתם את המצות, כי בעצם היום הזה הוצאתי את צבאותיכם מארץ מצרים

“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”

According to the Torah, the Israelites were addressed by Moshe no later than the tenth of Nissan, and were told that they are going to leave Egypt on the fifteenth. They were also commanded to eat the Pesah sacrifice with Matzoth. These verses challenge the above cited paragraph in two ways:

- a. The reason for eating the Matzah is the divine commandment and not the circumstances. The Israelites knew of the exodus in advance and were not surprised. They were even told to eat the Matzah fully dressed for a long journey.
- b. If the Israelites knew beforehand that they will be traveling, how come they did not pack some bread? The knowledge that she will be travelling in four days to the desert, a place not known for supermarkets and fast food chains, would have sent any good Jewish mother packing. The Israelites should have emptied Egypt not only of its gold and silver, but of its bread as well.

Additionally, anyone who ever bothered to look at a package of matzah and see that it was done in less than 18 minutes, will have to wonder how the dough taken out of Egypt not became Hametz. Even if the Israelites took the highway, they would have probably needed more than 18 minutes to get to the Ramses Turnpike or the Nile State Parkway, and during that time their dough would definitely become Hametz.

These questions and others related to the topic have bothered me for many years, and even though the commentators offered different ways to untangle the textual confusion, I couldn't find that soothes me. It was the research I made regarding the machine matzah which opened my eyes. **You see, it turns out that the leading experts on bread and beer production in the ancient world were no other than our dear friends, the Egyptians.**

Not only the story of the Matzah at the exodus made sense to me now, this revelation solved for me several other mysteries:

In [Genesis 19:3](#) we read of the messengers who came to visit Lot and were treated by their host to Matzoth. Rashi explains that it was Pesah, but it is a little hard to understand why Lot would celebrate Pesah, in Sodom, hundreds of years before the Exodus. The explanation is much simpler. He baked Matzoth because he didn't have the time or the knowledge required for baking bread.

This also explains why, as we previously read ([18:6](#)), Abraham asks Sarah to hurry up and make עוגות. He is not referring to cake 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.

The secret of bread making was kept zealously by the Egyptians, and more specifically, by their priests. This should not come as a surprise to us, since in many societies priests ran lucrative businesses, such as wineries, under the cloak of holiness. This is evident in the paragraph describing the meal served to Joseph's brothers upon their second visit. Joseph ate by himself, and so did his brothers and 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 Hebrew 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 not have mentioned bread. 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 now return to the story of the Exodus. 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 even if they wanted to, they could not have stocked on bread or make fresh bread during the exodus. The reason for that was that the only way they knew to make bread was to let the dough sit for over a day and then bake it.

In conclusion, both reasons given by the Torah are valid. The Israelites were commanded to eat Matzah, and they were not capable of making bread. God did not command the people to ask for bread the same way they asked for gold and silver, because in their mind the bread represented Egyptian priesthood and paganism.

This is, in my opinion, the reason why 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.

I began my story and my journey with the matzah baking machine and ended it with a discussion of ancient paganism, but to say the truth, I find myself wondering more than once, if we have not wandered off the path God paved for us. There are zealous, virulent, and sometimes violent wars, over the manner Matzah is baked, the levels of supervision, the accurate time frame for the baking, and exact size or volume of the portions of the final product we are obligated to consume.

Let us not forget that the message of Pesah is that the human spirit guided by God, can endure in its struggle for freedom and the rejection of bigotry and idolatry.

Hag Samaeh to all!

Rabbi Haim Ovadia

4/22/16