

Matzoh Memories

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וַיֵּאָפוּ אֶת־הַבֶּצֶק אֲשֶׁר הוֹצִיאוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם עֲגֹת מַצּוֹת כִּי לֹא חָמֵץ כִּי־גִרְשׁוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם וְלֹא יָכְלוּ לְהִתְמַהֵמֵה וְגַם־צִדָּה לֹא־עָשׂוּ לָהֶם:

And they baked unleavened cakes of the dough that they had taken out of Egypt, for it was not leavened, since they had been driven out of Egypt and could not delay; nor had they prepared any provisions for themselves. Exodus 12:39

These "unleavened cakes"... Matzot... what are they? The bread of affliction, a symbol of freedom, rapid redemption, or humility, or all the above? For me, I have fond memories of eating matzoh on the first night of Passover. I always savored the first bite of matzoh for it meant that all the preparation had been done, not by me, mind you, but by my dear mother.

Ilse, or Omi as my children endearingly called her, could be seen standing on a chair, cleaning the venetian blinds in my bedroom the day after she finished baking and distributing a hundred hamantaschen to family, friends and neighbors for Purim. She worked tirelessly for weeks to ready our home for the seder and the Passover week, all in strict accordance with the laws of Kashrut.

She cleaned out her kitchen days in advance of the seder. My siblings and I were relegated to eating breakfast in the basement using the clothes dryer as a table because she didn't want any "hametz" in the kitchen as she had already brought up her special Pesach dishes to begin the cooking process. Oh yes... there was fancy gold-rimmed china for the seder that had a royal quality, but also a motley array of other accessory dishes, cups and silverware we only saw on Pesach that symbolized the special, almost fairytale like quality of the holiday. There were the flat butter knives, and the small round metal plates with a checkerboard picnic tablecloth design that served as individual carriers of the parsley, haroseth, matzoh and maror served at the designated times during the seder. The beige porcelain pitcher with the pale blue rim held non-alcoholic sweet raisin wine with a touch of cinnamon she made just for us children. And the two toned, majestic crystal goblet that sat alone but proudly at the end of her elegantly set table had survived the escape from Germany and was filled with wine in the ready for Elijah's mystical visit.

No detail was ignored. It was my mother's big holiday to be sure as we all were treated to her five-course meal of chopped liver, matzo ball soup, beet salad, roast beef, and an unlimited array of yummy desserts including sweet matzoh kugel and dreamy wine cream. She lovingly made

these dishes by hand from the German recipes she had used since childhood and had somehow managed to bring with her when she escaped the Nazis and came to this country alone on a boat in 1939, at the age of 19. Her “Deutsches Reich Reisepass”, German passport imprinted her name as Ilse “Sara” Katten. Changing the name to “Sara” for Jewish women and “Israel” for Jewish men was a way for the Nazis to label and single out Jews. These were laws made to set them apart from the rest of society. Somehow, despite these difficulties experienced in her and my father’s personal exodus to freedom from Nazi Germany, my mother and my Dad were always warm, hospitable and shared their table with others who were alone and needed a seder to join.

I have to also mention our favorite kids’ breakfast matzoh creation... we called it “Matzoh Brockel “(derived from the German word, *gebrochen*, meaning broken or crushed). We took a cup or mug, broke one or two pieces of matzo into it, crunched it down so it was tightly packed. Next, we poured heated milk over it, let it soak until it became soft, and drank out the warm milk. We then took a plate... placed it over the opening of the cup, held onto the plate and cup and flipped them over at the same time. We placed it on the table and gently lifted up the cup... and *voila*, we had a matzo tower to which we added cinnamon, sugar and jam.

Getting back to my original question... what is matzo?

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in a 2013 article, entitled, “Sharing the Bread of Affliction”, was puzzled by two features of the seder evening. The first is the conflict between the two explanations of the unleavened bread. At the beginning of the story when we recite the Ha Lachma Anya prayer, we call matzoh the bread of affliction.

This is the bread of affliction that our fathers ate in the land of Egypt.

Later on in the evening, when we reveal the middle matzah, we speak of it as the bread of freedom.

The Holy One, Blessed is God, revealed Himself to them and redeemed them. They baked the dough which they had brought out of Egypt into unleavened bread.

They were in such a hurry that they could not wait for the dough to rise.

Rabbi Saks asked... is matzah a symbol of oppression or liberty? Surely it could not be both.

The other element he found strange was the invitation to others to join us in eating the bread of affliction. What kind of hospitality is that, he thought, to ask others to share our suffering?

He found the answer to this quandary in Primo Levi’s great book, “If This is a Man”, in which he recounts the harrowing experiences he had in Auschwitz during the Holocaust. He was among those prisoners who were too ill to join the brutal “death marches” when the camps were abandoned by the Nazi guards in January 1945 fearing the Russian advance. The remaining

prisoners were left alone in the camp for ten days with only scraps of food and fuel. He lit a fire to bring some warmth to his fellow prisoners, many of them dying. He wrote:

‘When the broken window was repaired and the stove began to spread its heat, something seemed to relax in everyone, and at that moment Towarowski (a Franco-Pole of twenty-three, with typhus) proposed to the others that each of them offer a slice of bread to us three who had been working. And so it was agreed. ‘Only a day before’, says Levi, ‘this would have been inconceivable. The law of the camp said: “Eat your own bread, and if you can, that of your neighbour.” To do otherwise would have been suicidal. The offer of sharing bread “was the first human gesture that occurred among us. I believe that that moment can be dated as the beginning of the change by which we who had not died slowly changed from *Haftlinge* [prisoners] to men again.’

Rabbi Saks reflects that sharing food is the first act through which slaves become free human beings. One who fears tomorrow does not offer their bread to others. But those who are willing to divide their food with a stranger have already shown themselves capable of fellowship and faith, the two things from which hope is born. That is why we begin the Seder by inviting others to join us. That is how we turn affliction into freedom. This may explain why my parents always demonstrated their hospitality, time and again.

Rabbi Mel Gottlieb, in his weekly devar Torah cited British Author, Israel Zangwill who once said that “On Pesach, the Jew eats history.” The food, this ‘bread of affliction’ (matzah) becomes the bread of our salvation. It nourishes our hunger to work for freedom and justice for all, to take pride in our people’s history as representatives of this mission, to join with all humanity in the glorious future we are charged to create, and to ingest the joy that such a life of service and meaning creates.

To me, matzo is a metaphor for life itself. It was baked in a hurry... reflective of how our lives go by so quickly, how plans can be interrupted and how sometimes there is no chance for “leavening” of our desires and wishes. We must learn to deal with life’s ups and downs and be willing to shift direction at a moment’s notice. Certainly, the pandemic is an example of how plans can change.

Secondly, matzo is brittle. It is easily broken and loses its shape. Life can be brittle at times, and when personal or societal tragedies happen, we lose our foundation and can find ourselves without form or direction. Our own recent plague-like pandemic showed us how brittle life can be, and how sometimes we are left to just pick up the pieces as best we can. Maybe that is what Tevye was referring to when he said, if it were not for tradition, our lives would be as shaky as a fiddler on the roof!

Third, matzo often leaves behind a trail of crumbs. We know when someone has eaten matzo by looking at their plate, tablecloth, chair or the floor beneath them. Our actions in life often leave behind crumbs of evidence that we have been there, for good and bad, thus comprising our legacy. If we follow the mitzvot and dedicate ourselves to a life of *maasim tovim* (good deeds), the crumbs we leave behind are like seeds that can sprout into more good things, like children

and grandchildren; or the joy that occurs when we help someone in need. That person in turn, may eventually help someone else. On the other hand, if we live our life in a way that is less than morally just, we may leave behind crumbs of tragedy, hurt and loss in the wake of our selfish behavior.

Finally, matzo is moldable. We can smash it, soak it, fry it, bake it, cover it with butter and jam and do countless other creative maneuvers to make it more palatable, savory or sweet. We can turn it into a kugel, stuffing, balls, coatings, cakes and cookies. Just look on today's grocery shelves, there are plain, whole wheat, egg, organic, rye, gluten free, shmurah, chocolate covered and rosemary and garlic matzoh varieties, just to name a few.

In life, we must also be malleable and work to optimize what we have. We are all dished in one form or another a set of basic ingredients, human qualities, skills, talents, strengths, and weaknesses. We start out as if we are made of the plain flour and water that form a matzoh as we embark on our life journey. We can accept the simple ingredients we have been dealt, like eating plain matzoh, which is certainly fine, but we all know that can get a bit tiresome after a while. Or we can take our life gifts, and they are gifts, and over time, by reforming, exploring, experimenting, and creating our own unique life path that incorporates our own basic ingredients but also mixes in and takes advantage of other components that can enrich our lives and those of others. We can take the plain matzo we have been served, and make "matzo brockel" out of it, to form our own sweet tower of life's accomplishments.

The lesson of matzo is also one we can instill in our children, who have yet to be leavened. When they ask, why is this night different from all other nights, we can answer by saying that tonight we thank God for the matzo we have been given and celebration of a life well led that it represents. Just as our ancestors who were slaves had to hurry and make their matzoh as they escaped their state of bondage, matzoh reminds us today that we are all blessed to live a life without the shackles of slavery and one in which we have the freedom to live life fully, make the best of what we have and do so with integrity.

I conclude with some final poignant thoughts from Rabbi Saks. In our very individualistic society, we are at risk of "losing the logic of liberty". Freedom is not simply the ability to choose to do whatever we like so long as we do not harm others. It is born in the sense of solidarity that leads those who have more than they need to share with those who have less. Giving help to the needy and companionship to those who are alone, we bring freedom into the world, and with freedom, God.

Thanks Mom and Dad, for the beautiful matzoh memories.

<https://www.rabbisacks.org/archive/sharing-the-bread-of-affliction/>

<https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/public/resources-ideas/source-sheets/tol-parashot/bo.pdf>

The metaphors of matzah

LINDA BERNSTEIN | GUEST CONTRIBUTOR



Linda Bernstein of San Francisco is a rabbinical intern at Congregation Netivot Shalom in Berkeley and a third-year rabbinical student at Academy for Jewish Religion California in Los Angeles. She is a PharmD.

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These “unleavened cakes” ... what are they? The bread of affliction? A symbol of freedom? Rapid redemption? Humility? All the above?

I have fond memories of eating matzah on Passover. I always savored the first bite, for it meant that all the preparation had been done, not by me, mind you, but by my dear mother.

Ilse, or Omi as my children endearingly called her, could be seen standing on a chair, cleaning the Venetian blinds in my bedroom the day after she finished baking and distributing some 100 hamantaschen to family, friends and neighbors for Purim. She worked tirelessly for weeks to ready our home for the seder and the Passover week, all in strict accordance with the laws of kashrut.

She cleaned out her kitchen days in advance of the seder. My siblings and I were relegated to eating breakfast in the basement, using the dryer as a table because she didn't want any hametz in the kitchen (as she had already brought up her special Pesach dishes).

Oh, yes ... there was fancy, gold-rimmed china that had a royal quality, but also a motley array of dishes, cups and silverware that we saw only on Pesach — and that symbolized the special, almost fairytale-like quality of the holiday.

Small metal plates (with a checkerboard, picnic-tablecloth design) served as carriers of the parsley, haroset, matzah and maror. A porcelain pitcher held nonalcoholic sweet-wine she made just for us children. A two-toned, majestic, crystal goblet (which survived an escape from Germany) was filled and ready for Elijah's visit.

No detail was ignored.

It was my mother's big holiday, to be sure, and we were treated to her five-course meal of chopped liver, matzah ball soup, beet salad, roast beef, and an unlimited array of yummy desserts (including sweet-matzah kugel and dreamy wine cream). She lovingly made it all by hand from the German recipes she had used since childhood — and somehow managed to bring to the U.S. in 1939 when she escaped the Nazis and came here at age 19, alone.

I must also mention our favorite matzah breakfast creation when we were kids: We called it “matzah brockel” (from the German *gebrochen*, meaning broken or crushed). We broke one or two squares of matzah into a cup or mug, crunching it down so it was tightly packed. Next, we poured heated milk over it, let it soak, then drank out the warm milk. Next, we placed a plate over the cup, flipped it over, removed the cup, and voila! We had a matzah tower to which we added cinnamon, sugar and jam.

But back to my original question: What is matzah?

To me, it's a metaphor for life. It was baked in a hurry — reflective of how our lives go by so quickly, how plans can be interrupted, how sometimes there is no chance for “leavening” of our desires and wishes. We must learn to deal with life's ups and downs and be willing to shift direction at a moment's notice.

Secondly, matzah is brittle. It breaks easily and loses its shape. Life can be brittle, and when personal or societal tragedies happen, we often find ourselves without form or direction. The Covid-19 pandemic, for example, has shown us just how brittle life can be, and sometimes we are left to just pick up the pieces as best we can.

Thirdly, matzah often leaves behind a trail of crumbs (on the plate, the tablecloth or the floor). Our actions in life often leave behind crumbs of evidence that we have been there, for good and/or bad, thus creating our legacy. If we follow the mitzvot and dedicate ourselves to a life of *maasim tovim* (good deeds), the crumbs we leave behind are like seeds that can sprout into more good things: children and grandchildren to carry on our traditions, or helping someone in need (who, in turn, might go on to help somebody else). Conversely, if we live in a way that is less than morally just, we may leave behind crumbs of tragedy, hurt and loss in the wake of our selfish behavior.

Finally, matzah is moldable. We can smash it, soak it, fry it, bake it, or cover it with butter and jam. We can turn it into a kugel, stuffing, matzah balls, coatings, cakes and cookies. Even on our grocery shelves these days there are plain, whole-wheat, egg, organic, rye, gluten-free,

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Within humble matzah, metaphors for life

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shmurah, chocolate-covered and rosemary and garlic matzahs!

In life, we must also be malleable and work to optimize what we have.

We are each dished a set of basic ingredients: human qualities, skills, talents, strengths and weaknesses. It's as if we are made of plain flour and water. We can accept what we have been dealt — just as eating plain matzah is fine ... for a while.

Better that we can take our life gifts (and gifts they are) and, over time, by reforming, exploring and experimenting, create our own unique life path — one that incorporates our basic ingredients but mixes in things that can enrich our lives and those of others.

We can take the plain matzah we have been served and make matzah brockel, forming our own sweet tower of life's accomplishments.

The lesson of matzah can be instilled in our children, who have yet to be leavened. "Why is this night different from all other nights?" Answer by saying that tonight we thank God for the matzah we have been given, and that we celebrate a life well-led that it represents.

Because our ancestors had to make their matzah on the run, matzah reminds us that we are blessed to live without the shackles of slavery and that we have the freedom to live life fully, making the best of what we have and doing so with integrity.

Thanks Mom, for life lessons and the beautiful matzah memories. ■



Linda Bernstein's mother preparing seder plates for her family in the 1990s from their kitchen in San Francisco.

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of J.