

ARE WE TRULY FREE WHEN OTHERS ARE NOT?

The Many Meanings of Matzah

By Rabbi Micah Streiffer

Pesach is called *Z'man Cheiruteinu*—the season of our freedom. But what does it actually mean to be free? The Pesach seder explores this question through the symbol of matzah, the “bread of affliction.” If we look closely, we will find that the unleavened bread carries two seemingly contradictory explanations—and that tension offers an important insight into the nature of freedom.

Explanation #1

Matzah is the Bread of Affliction

הָא לַחֲמַא עֲנִיא דִּי אַכְלוּ אַבְהַתְנָא בְּאַרְעָא דְּמִצְרַיִם.

Ha lachma anya di achlu avhatana b'ar'a d'Mitzrayim.

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

These words, which we say early in the seder, connect the matzah with affliction and slavery. Our ancestors ate it *in* Egypt, and by eating it now, we place ourselves back into that experience. We are reliving and reenacting our past experience of oppression.

Explanation #2

Matzah is the Bread of Freedom

מִצָּה זוֹ שְׂאֵנוּ אוֹכְלִים, עַל שׁוּם מָה? עַל שׁוּם שְׁלֵא הִסְפִּיק בְּצֻקָם שֶׁל אֲבוֹתֵינוּ לְהַחְמִיץ
עַד שֶׁנִּגְלָה עֲלֵיהֶם מֶלֶךְ מַלְכֵי הַמְּלָכִים, הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא, וְגָאֵלָם.

This matzah that we are eating, what is it for? It is because our ancestors' dough was not yet able to rise when the Holy Blessed One came and redeemed them.

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Only a few pages later, the matzah now symbolizes not slavery but freedom; not oppression but the escape from oppression. It is the bread that we carried with us into the wilderness, and we eat it now to reenact that moment of redemption.

How can this be? How can the matzah represent both slavery and the end of slavery, both oppression and redemption? This is indicative of a larger tension—Pesach is a time of both slavery and freedom. Our rituals recognize both experiences at the same time: we recline in our seats and eat and drink like royalty; yet our ritual foods taste of bitterness and salt. We sing with joy, “Once we were slaves, now we are free!” but we also cry out, “This year we are slaves, next year may we be free!” It’s a beautiful contradiction: Judaism recognizes that freedom and enslavement are intertwined with one another; that even as we celebrate our own liberation, there is still oppression in the world. Are we truly free when others are not? Are we truly redeemed when the world is still unredeemed?

This ancient contradiction remains important today, especially as our eyes gaze eastward—as we think about our connection with Israel. On the one hand, we live in a time of a thriving Jewish state and a Hebrew culture unrivaled in any other age; yet we know that Palestinians have paid a heavy price for our sovereignty and wellbeing.

On the one hand, we sighed with relief as the last Israeli hostage was returned from Gaza; yet we know that the pain of those living in Gaza and the West Bank continues to deepen. On the one hand, this week we celebrate our people’s freedom and resilience; yet our celebration is tempered by the knowledge that Israelis remain at war, Palestinians and Iranians continue to be without true freedom or safety, and Jewish spaces around the world are under heavy security.

If the message of Pesach is that we cannot be free until all people are free, then the seder cries out to us that we still have much work to do. That we live in an unredeemed world, and that our freedom and sovereignty are only provisional, since they are ultimately bound up with the freedom and sovereignty of all those with whom we share our sacred land, and with whom we inhabit our fragile world. On this Pesach, may we redouble our resolve to bring redemption. May we hear and heed the most central message of the seder: that even in a broken world, redemption is still possible. Once, we were enslaved, and we struggled our way toward freedom. Next year, may we all truly be redeemed.