

HAMEITZ U-MATZAH

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JUST BEFORE THE APEX of the Exodus drama—the final plague and the actual departure from Egypt—the Torah makes a sudden shift in genre. Exodus chapter 12 opens with, “This month will be for you the first of months,” the marking of the new moon, the first *mitzvah* given to Israel—and with that, the Jewish legal tradition officially begins. Having established the calendar, the Torah immediately begins detailing the rituals for what will become the first of its yearly observances: Pesah. At the center of those rituals are two related *mitzvot*—eating *matzah* and not eating *hameitz*—that together will serve as keys to understanding the role of the *mitzvot* in the life of the new people of Israel.

The basic reason for eating *matzah* is well-known: to remember that our ancestors left Egypt “in haste - בחפזון” (Exodus 12:11). They had to eat *matzah*, so we eat *matzah*, to remind us of the Exodus.¹

Yet the severity of the consequences for anyone who violates these laws may take us by surprise:

שמות יב:טו

שְׁבַע יָמִים מַצּוֹת תֹּאכְלוּ אֹךְ בַּיּוֹם הָרִאשׁוֹן
תִּשְׁבִּיתוּ שְׂאֵר מִבְּחֵיכֶם כִּי כָל אֹכֵל חֻמֶּץ וְנִכְרְתָה
הַנֶּפֶשׁ הַהוּא מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל מִיּוֹם הָרִאשׁוֹן עַד יוֹם
הַשְּׁבִיעִי:

Exodus 12:15

Seven days you will eat *matzot*, but on the first day you will remove leaven from your houses, for anyone who eats *hameitz*, from the first day to the seventh day, **that person will be cut off from Israel.**

Kareit, or “cutting off” (spiritual excommunication from the people of Israel),² is the most serious punishment the Torah can issue. What is it about eating *hameitz* on Pesah that is so fundamentally egregious that it incurs expulsion from Israel? Conversely, what is it about eating *matzah*—among all the rituals of Pesah—that is so definitional that the Torah’s name for the holiday becomes “חג המצות - the Festival of Matzot”?³

An important clue that can help us make sense of this highly-charged polarity comes in the form of a play on words the Torah introduces two verses later. See if you can spot an oddity in this phrasing:

שמות יב:יז

וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת הַמַּצּוֹת כִּי בַעֲצָם הַיּוֹם הוֹצֵאתִי
אֶת צְבָאוֹתֵיכֶם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת הַיּוֹם
הַזֶּה לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם חֻקַּת עוֹלָם:

Exodus 12:17

Observe the *matzot*, for on this very day I brought your troops out of the Land of Egypt, so observe this day throughout the generations as an eternal decree.

Why are we being told to **observe** the *matzot*? Aren’t we supposed to **eat** the *matzot*? The Mekhilta, an early collection of *midrash* on the book of Exodus, exposes a double meaning encoded in the verse:

- 1 Based on Exodus 12 alone, *matzah* is not the obvious choice for the holiday’s central ritual. The Israelites were also told to “wear sandals and carry a staff - נָעִלְיֶכֶם בְּרַגְלֵיכֶם וּמָקַלְכֶם בְּיָדְכֶם” (Exodus 12:11).
- 2 What exactly this punishment entails is the subject of some debate. In Tanakh, it seems to indicate expulsion from the people of Israel. In Rabbinic literature it is alternately described as the cause of physical death, or loss of spiritual reward in the world to come, or both. The most distinguishing feature of *kareit* is that it is not a punishment issued by human courts, but by God—incurred upon the commission of certain sins.
- 3 The Torah refers to the holiday as *חג המצות* four times (in Exodus 23:15 & 34:18, Leviticus 23:6, and Deuteronomy 16:16). The name *חג הפסח* (Hag Ha-Pesah), is used only once (in Exodus 34:25). The word *פסח* (*pesah*), by itself (the way we refer to the holiday today), in Tanakh always refers specifically to the sacrifice.

מכילתא מסכתא דפסחא ט

רבי יאשיה אומר: אל תקרא בן, אלא "ושמרתם את המצות". בדרך שאין מחמיצין את המצה, כך לא יחמיצו את המצוה, אלא אם באת מצוה על ידך, עשה אותה מיד!

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R. Yoshiah says: Don't read it this way (*matzot*), but instead as, "Observe the *mitzvot*"—just as we do not allow the *matzah* to become "leavened," so too, we do not let a *mitzvah* become "leavened." Instead, if you have the opportunity to do a *mitzvah*, do it right away!⁴

Perhaps you had already made this connection. The words *matzot* and *mitzvot* sound so similar that, though they do not share a root, it is easy to associate them. R. Yoshiah points out that it isn't just a matter of sound; the two words are also "homographs," spelled exactly the same way in the Torah. This is possible because the letter vav (ו) can serve either as a consonant, with a "v" sound, or as a vowel, with an "o" sound. In Modern Hebrew, they are distinguished by adding a second vav to indicate a consonantal "v" (as the scribe of this passage did in order to make the point clear). But in the Torah, the two words are spelled the same way⁵: מצות.

If "observing the *matzot*" sounded a little odd, "observing the *mitzvot*" is a very common phrase, appearing all over Tanakh. Avraham was the first to be described as having "וַיִּשְׁמַר מִשְׁמֵרֵי מִצְוֹתַי" - observed My observances, My commandments" (Genesis 26:5). Deuteronomy alone has over thirty instances of some variation of the phrase. It even makes an appearance in the Ten Commandments, in the commandment prohibiting idolatry, which promises that God will reward those who observe faithfully, for God is:

שמות כ:ו

וַעֲשֵׂה חֶסֶד לְאֲלֹפִים לְאַהֲבֵי וּלְשֹׁמְרֵי מִצְוֹתַי.

Exodus 20:6

The One who does kindness to the thousandth generation of those who love Me and **observe My commandments**.

Since we read the Torah every year, increasingly familiarizing ourselves with its language, we are likely to detect a hidden message in the instruction, "ושמרתם את המצות" - to observe the *matzot*, one that points us toward a broader consideration of our relationship to the commandments.

The lesson R. Yoshiah sees in this "visual pun" is very specific: we should treat the commandments like we treat baking *matzah*, and do them without delay. But the implications of this parallel are far broader. The allusion to the commandments is no side lesson—this is the very point of eating *matzah*. Eating *matzah* is itself a *mitzvah* that is meant to symbolize all of the *mitzvot*.

What, then, does *hameitz* symbolize?

Matzah, remember, is unleavened bread—but it is still bread. It is later called "לחם עני" - the bread of poverty" or "the bread of affliction" (Deuteronomy 16:3). It is not good bread. It is almost anti-bread. It is not supposed to be enjoyable. You are not supposed to be thinking about the pleasure of eating *matzot*, but of the commandment to eat them.

Hameitz, then, is **good** bread—doughy, delicious, gluten-filled bread. The kind of bread that makes your mouth water when you smell it baking. The kind of bread you remember.

Where do the people of Israel remember eating bread like this? Listen to their lament just after crossing the Sea of Reeds:

שמות טז:ג

וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֲלֵהֶם בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִי יִתֵּן מוֹתָנוּ בְּיַד ה' בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם בְּשִׁבְתָּנוּ עַל סֵיר הַבָּשָׂר בְּאֲכָלֵנוּ לֶחֶם לְשֹׁבַע כִּי הוֹצֵאתָם אֶתָנוּ אֶל הַמִּדְבָּר הַזֶּה לְהָמִית אֶת כָּל הַקָּהָל הַזֶּה בָּרָעַב:

4 The Mekhilta first gives a legalistic interpretation of the verb, reading שמרתם to mean, "guard the *matzot*"—that is, watch over them carefully during the cooking process to make sure they don't become leavened: "If the dough starts to rise, one should douse one's hands with cold water and then pull it out."

5 That is almost always the case. There are four times in the Torah when *matzot* is spelled without a vav (מצת); see Exodus 12:18, 13:6, 29:2, and Leviticus 2:14. The only place in Tanakh where *mitzvot* is spelled with a double-vav is Nehemiah 9:10.

Exodus 16:3

The children of Israel said to [Moshe and Aharon], “Would that we had died by the hand of the Eternal **in the Land of Egypt**, when we sat by the pots of meat and **ate bread to our satisfaction**. But you have taken us out into this desert to kill this whole congregation by starvation.”

Egypt was the place of *hameitz*, the kind of bread that one eats to satisfaction. Egypt, we know from Genesis, has always been the place one goes to escape hunger. Avraham went down to Egypt “for there was a famine in the land” of Canaan (Genesis 12:10). Eventually, the whole world will travel to Egypt seeking the same refuge:

בראשית מא:נד-נה

וַיְהִי רָעֵב בְּכָל הָאֲרָצוֹת וּבְכָל אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם הָיָה לֶחֶם. וַתִּרְעֵב כָּל אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם וַיִּצְעַק הָעָם אֶל פַּרְעֹה לֶלֶחֶם.

Genesis 41:54-55

There was famine in all other lands, but in the whole land of Egypt, there was **bread**. And when the whole land of Egypt was hungry, the people called out to Pharaoh **for bread**.

Egypt, in the Torah’s landscape, is the kingdom of abundance. The Torah compares it to “the Garden of the Eternal” (Genesis 13:10)—that is, like another Eden

on Earth. It is thus the Land of Bread, the kind of bread that has had plenty of time to soak and expand.

There is, however, a catch. What do people do when they need the bread of Egypt? They must “call out” to Pharaoh and beseech him. The abundance of Egypt creates dependence on the powers of Egypt. That dependence eventually makes people weak, vulnerable to subjugation. When we are desperate, we will do anything. We might even say:

בראשית מז:יט

קִנְיָה אֶתְנוּ וְאֶת אֲדָמָתֵנוּ בִּלְחֶם וְנִהְיָה אֲנִיחֵנוּ וְאֲדָמָתֵנוּ עֲבָדִים לַפַּרְעֹה.

Genesis 47:19

Acquire us, and our land, **for bread**, and we, with our land will become slaves to Pharaoh.

Anyone upon whom one must rely for physical sustenance becomes one’s master. Any society in which one or a few people control all the material wealth is not a free society—or will not be one for long.

Bread has become a motif through which we can chart the descent into Egypt, the dependence on Pharaoh, and even the emergence of slavery in that land.⁶ *Hameitz*, the fullest form of bread, thus comes to symbolize all of those forces that must be left behind.⁷

Bread, then, also becomes the medium through which those forces are diminished. First, the bread itself is diminished: *matzah* is a bread that will provide survival, but not total satisfaction. In a very literal sense, the people of Israel are being taught to live with

6 Moshe is already employing this symbolic language when we get to an oft-quoted verse in his speech in the Book of Deuteronomy. Look at how he links the “observe the *mitzvot*” phrasing we have been considering, at the end of Deuteronomy 8:2, to the bread imagery in v. 3: “Remember all the way that the Eternal your God led you through the desert for forty years, in order to try you and test you, to know if your heart intended to **observe the commandments or not**. God caused you to suffer, and starved you, and then fed you manna, something neither you nor your ancestors had ever known, in order to let you know that a person does not live on **bread** alone, but on every utterance of God’s mouth does a person live.”

A prayer attributed to R. Alexandri (or, some say, R. Hamnuna), quoted in the Talmud (Berakhot 17a) picks up on this motif: “Master of All Worlds, it is revealed and known before You that it is our will to do Your will. But what stops us? The yeast in the dough and subjugation by the kingdoms. May it be Your will that You save us from their hands, and return us to perform the decrees of Your will, with a pure heart.” Rashi comments on this line:

שֶׁאִין שְׂבַעֲיָהּ – יִצֵּר הָרַע שֶׁבִּלְבָבֵנוּ הַמַּחֲמִיצֵנוּ:

The yeast in the dough—this is the evil inclination (*yetzeir ha-ra*) in our hearts, which leavens us (*ha-mahmitzeinu*).

The yeast in the dough and the subjugation by the kingdoms are often read as two separate problems, one internal and one external. But, in the scheme we have been tracing, they are directly related.

7 The Zohar (II:182a) puts it quite lyrically: מִרְשׁוֹ דְּלֵהוּ, מִרְשׁוֹ אֲחֵרָא, מִהֵוָּא רִשׁוֹ דְּאִקְרִי חֲמֵץ. When Israel left Egypt, they left their domain, that other domain, the one called, “*hameitz*.”

less. Soon they will run out of *matzah* and be forced to call out to God—not Pharaoh—for their sustenance. God will respond by raining “לחם מן השמים - bread from the heavens.” These people’s entire orientation to bread is being shifted, training them to rely not on terrestrial powers, but heavenly ones.

The Torah has created a matrix of associated terms that allow us to reenact our people’s spiritual development through the particular *mitzvot* of Pesah. The weeklong replacement of *hameitz* with *matzah* is about more than just remembering the haste of the Exodus. It represents the larger transformation that the Exodus brings: the replacement of human power with divine authority. Our observance of the *mitzvot* proclaims that we are servants to no one but God. As we trade in the whims of a tyrant for the will of the Almighty, we are moving, once again, from *hameitz* to *matzah*, from *Mitzrayim* to *mitzvah*.⁸ ♦

8 All these terms have the double-consonant sound, מֵצַ (m-tz). They are linked in an alliterative pattern that draws them into a kind of dialogue with one another.