

SOMEONE ORDER MATZAH TO GO?

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Though it is true that this week's parsha is Metzora, it is also Shabbos HaGadol, the Shabbos before Pesach. So, I've focussed on Pesach this week,

The age old question has been, did our forefather in Egypt eat matzah on the night of the fifteenth of Nissan because they didn't have enough time to bake bread, or, did they not have enough time to bake bread because it was ordained in heaven that we should eat matzah in Egypt?

"What difference does it make?" you may be asking yourselves. The difference is whether or not matzah represents far more than a simple commemoration of our hasty departure from Egypt.

The truth is, it wouldn't be the first time that a flour-related product has come to symbolize freedom. The first such usage goes back all the way to the original transgression of man, when Adam ate from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. After "finding" Adam after he ate against G-d's expressed will, G-d pronounced his punishment:

To the man He said, 'Because you listened to the voice of your wife, and you ate from the tree which I commanded you not to, saying don't eat of it, the ground will be cursed because of you; through great struggle you will eat all of your life. It will bring forth thorns and thistles, and you will eat the herb of the field. By the sweat of your brow, you will eat bread until you return to the earth' (Bereishis 3:17-19)

From the above verses, it sounds as if the curse for the ground and the curse that forces man struggle to procure food were one and the same punishment, perhaps the ground's curse was even the reason for the difficulty of producing bread. However, the Talmud seems to indicate otherwise:

Rebi Yehoshua ben Levi said: At the time The Holy One, Blessed is He, told Adam, 'It will bring forth thorns and thistles ...' tears formed in his eyes. He said before Him, 'Master of the Universe! Will I and my donkey eat from the same trough?!' When He answered him, 'By the sweat of your brow you will eat bread ...' he calmed down. (Pesachim 118a)

Reading between the lines, we learn that eating thorns and thistles was a more difficult consequence for Adam to accept than having to work hard for bread. What bothered Adam about eating thorns and thistles? The quality of the food? Adam himself says: Will I and my donkey eat

from the same trough?! In other words, what Adam had to eat (thorns and thistles) as a consequence for transgressing G-d's command bothered him because it was the same food his donkey ate.

Couldn't Adam have transformed the thorns and thistles into something that the donkey could not make, thereby distinguishing his food from that of the donkey? Man, who has always been so capable of manipulating his environment to suit his needs and desires, surely could have found a way to make bread from thorns and thistles also.

Or could he have?

Maybe our technological ability was the result of being told to produce bread by the sweat of our brow. Perhaps the potential for technological advancement was not something intrinsic to man prior to that level of punishment. This seems to be the way a Talmudic commentator, the Meiri, understands this Talmudic dictum, as seen through his explanation of the following mishnah:

If there is no flour, there is no Torah ... (Pirke Avos 3:21).

The mishnah states the obvious: you have to eat if you want to learn. However, the Meiri elevates this discussion to a whole new level:

Flour comes from grinding wheat, which the Ultimate Wisdom made for this purpose. Through this, man is distinguished from the rest of the animals, as the Talmud states (Pesachim 118a):

at the time The Holy One, Blessed is He, told Adam, 'It will bring forth thorns and thistles ...' tears formed in his eyes. He said before Him, 'Master of the Universe! Will I and my donkey eat from the same trough?'

What this means is, had it not been that his food was ground finely, he would not have been able to achieve the completion of Torah (i.e., receive Torah at Mt. Sinai 26 generations later) ... (Meiri, Pirke Avos 3:21)

What the Meiri seems to be saying is that whether or not we would have been able to intellectually accept the Torah was dependent upon our being given the ability to produce bread by the sweat of our brow. The difference between living the life of a man and that of the donkey was symbolized by our ability to produce flour, which shows a higher intellectual, innovative capacity.

Thus, according to the Meiri, the deeper explanation of the mishnah is: had there been no capacity to produce flour, there would have been no intellectual capacity to receive Torah. Had G-d not distinguished Adam, allowing him to rise above the "trough" of his donkey, Adam would never have produced descendants that, 26 generations later, could merit to receive the Torah at Mt. Sinai.

What makes this approach to what happened in the garden so compelling is that it is repeated, twenty-six generations later. Two millennia after Adam was expelled from the garden, the Jewish people were enslaved in Egypt. They had come down to Egypt as guests of Paroah in Ya'akov's time, but within one hundred years they had become slaves to the state. However, as G-d had promised Avraham centuries earlier, the time for redemption from Egyptian slavery eventually came.

The night prior to the departure from Egypt, G-d commanded the Jewish people to celebrate the first Pesach Seder, at which matzah was to be eaten. Why matzah? The verse explains:

They baked the dough which they took out of Egypt, matzah cakes which did not leaven, because the Egyptians sent them out and they could not delay ... (Shemos 12:39)

The answer to the question first posed about the matzah emerges when considering that the Talmud refers to the Jewish people as "adam," and the nations of the world as "chamor"-donkey (according to the Maharal, Egypt is specifically represented by the donkey), and that, after 210 years in Egypt, the Jewish people had moved beyond the borders of Goshen, where they had first moved as a community, leaving it behind for Egyptian society. They had assimilated; they were eating from the same intellectual "trough" as the Egyptians-the chamor. They were worshipping their G-ds and following their practices.

The name of the holiday of Pesach alludes to this assimilation. The Torah tells us that G-d "skipped" (posayach) over the house of the Jewish people the night He brought the tenth and final plague upon the Egyptians. Why did He have to "skip" over their houses? Because there were Jewish homes in Egyptian neighborhoods.

Thus, twenty-six generations after Adam was distinguished from the chamor, adam, the Jewish people, were separated from the chamor, the Egyptian people. The symbol of this separation, once again, was flour (this time in the form of matzos). Yetzias Mitzraim was philosophically a repetition of what happened in the garden. Then it seems that we had too little time to bake proper bread in Egypt, because we were meant to eat matzah on Pesach. Is it a coincidence then, that the words flour (kemach) and Pesach are numerically equal (148)?

From this we can see that "trough" can be both literal and figurative. It can be a basin for food from which the donkey eats, or it can refer to an intellectual "basin" of knowledge from which materialistic people (symbolized by the donkey) intellectually feed. Flour, and later matzah, symbolized the refinement of that knowledge to the point that it elevates man out of physicality into the realm of the spiritual and the holy.