

Matzah: The Jewish Superfood

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Matzah is probably the symbol most associated with the holiday of Pesach. In the Torah, the holiday is even referred to as ChagHaMatzos, the holiday of *matzos*. This seems strange, however, for the *mitzvah* of eating *matzah* does not even apply the entire holiday! The Torah says that there is only an obligation to eat *matzah* the first night of Pesach.¹ On the rest of the holiday, there is only a prohibition of eating *chametz*, which while limiting our food variety does not require ingesting *matzah*. That being the case, why should the entire week-long holiday be called by a name that only applies for the first few hours?

The Talmud² actually notes a contradiction between passages in the Torah. Although in one passage the Torah limits the *mitzvah* to one night, elsewhere the Torah says we must eat *matzah* a full seven days,³ and in a third place it obligates eating *matzah* for six days!⁴ The Talmud deduces that the on first night there is an obligation to eat *matzah*, while on the rest of Pesach it is merely optional. The Vilna Gaon posits that there is actually an optional *mitzvah* to eat it for the rest of the holiday.⁵

The Vilna Gaon's opinion demands explanation. If, indeed, the Torah only obligates *matzah* the first night, why should there be an optional *mitzvah* afterwards?

After the sin of the Golden Calf, the *eigel*, the Torah lists several laws regarding idolatry:

*You shall break their altars, smash their monuments, and cut down their idolatrous trees....Lest you stray after their gods, slaughter to their god, and make a covenant with the dweller of the land, and he will invite you and you will eat from his slaughter. You will take his daughters for your sons...You shall not make idols.*⁶

Immediately after this it continues:

*You shall observe the Festival of Matzos. For seven days you shall eat matzos...*⁷

The Torah emphasizes the laws of idolatry immediately after the nation had sinned with the *eigel* to prevent the Jewish people from repeating the sin. We must break and remove the idols so that we do not fall prey to their allure. We must avoid eating the idolaters' food so that we will not assimilate into their culture, intermarry with them, and serve their gods. But what does that have to do with eating *matzah*? Why is *matzah* included in the aftermath of the *eigel*?

Interestingly, along the same lines, the Rabbis enacted several

decrees aimed at preventing assimilation and intermarriage. They prohibited the wine of a non-Jew, certain foods cooked by a non-Jew, and even the bread of a non-Jew. Even if the foods were kosher, they were banned in order to limit fraternization between Jews and Gentiles. The Rabbis were concerned that this could lead to intermarriage and idolatry.⁸ They were especially stringent regarding food, because eating breaks down the barriers between people, which can eventually lead to a breakdown in religious values as well.

Matzah is referred to as *michla dimihaymnusa*, the food of faith.⁹ Several reasons are offered for this. Some commentators explain that *matzah* reminds us of Hashem taking the Jewish people out of Egypt. This also reminds us of Hashem's control over the world.¹⁰ It reminds us of the trust the Jewish people had in following Hashem into the wilderness. Shelah even sees in *matzah* a symbol of Hashem's creating the world.¹¹ In the same way that *matzah* is made from just flour and water with no starter dough, Hashem created the world *ex nihilo*, with no "starter dough."

Matzah is thus a Jewish superfood. Eating it provides the spiritual vitamins and nutrients necessary for strengthening the Jew's connection to Hashem, thus warding off the glamor and appeal of ideals foreign to the Torah. That is why *matzah* is included among the other laws following the *eigel*. In the same manner that avoiding the foods of an idolater serves as a safeguard against idolatry, eating *matzah* also serves as an antidote, thereby preventing the Jew from being led astray by foreign ideals.

This may give us a better understanding of the Gaon's opinion. It is true that the Torah only obligates eating *matzah* on the first night of Pesach, the night that we discuss the Exodus. This ritual establishes the foundations of faith and instills them into our children. But the boost from the first night is meant to last at least for the duration of the holiday. The rest of the holiday is intended to build a relationship with Hashem based on those foundations developed at the Seder.¹²

That being said, it would make sense that eating *matzah* throughout the entire holiday, although not obligatory, would be a fulfillment of a *mitzvah* too, since it strengthens our faith, thus cementing the relationship.

That is also why the holiday is called Chag HaMatzos. Although there may not be an obligation to eat *matzah* the entire holiday, the influence of the *matzah* helps us achieve the goal of building our relationship with Hashem throughout Pesach and beyond. 🍷

¹ Shemos 12:18

² Pesachim 120a

³ Shemos 12:15

⁴ Devarim 16:8

⁵ Cited in Mishnah Berura 639:24 . see also Chizkuni (Bo)

⁶ Shemos 34:13-17

⁷ Shemos 34:18

⁸ Rambam (Maachalos Asuros 17:9)

⁹ Zohar vol.2 183b

¹⁰ TzrorHamor,

¹¹ Shelah (Pesaachim 19:3)

¹² Pri Tzaddik (Pesach 9)