



The Meaning Behind Chometz & Matzah

Rabbi Ephraim Nisenbaum



Food plays an important part in the Torah-- the laws of kashrus, the traditional foods customarily eaten during the different holidays, and the korbanos (sacrifices) eaten during the time of the Beis Hamikdash, and more. Yet it is interesting to note that after the destruction of the Beis Hamikdash there is only one time during the year that there is an obligation to eat specific foods. The mitzvos to eat matzah and marror and to drink the four cups of wine at the Pesach Seder are the only obligations—by both Torah and rabbinic law-- that remain incumbent upon every Jew to eat and drink. (Although there is a mitzvah to recite kiddush over a cup of wine, the mitzvah may be fulfilled by listening to its recitation and the listener need not drink from the kiddush wine.)

Why is it that the holiday marking the Jewish people's freedom from slavery and its birth as a nation is celebrated through eating rather than through any other type of mitzvah?

The Meshech Chachmah points out another oddity. Before leaving Egypt Hashem prepared the Jewish people for their journey, instructing them regarding clothing, vessels, and other articles of value—yet he made no such provisions for their food, forcing them to leave with unfinished bread. Why was that necessary?

Furthermore, the stringency of the laws of chometz also requires explanation. The prohibition of eating, benefiting from, and even owning chometz, makes it the most stringent of any dietary law in the Torah. What is its significance?

Perhaps these questions can be answered with an insight from Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch. Rav Hirsch in Bereishis (2:16) makes an interesting observation. The very first mitzvah given to mankind, to Adam and Chava, was a dietary law— not to eat from the eitz hada'as, the Tree of Knowledge. He explains that the purpose of the mitzvah was to instruct man how to develop his moral calling. Man was not to allow his earliest instinct, the basic need for food and nutrition, to be obscured by his desire for gastronomic pleasure. Although the fruit of the tree looked delectable and beautiful, Adam and Chava were to control their desires in order to fulfill the missive of Hashem. Overcoming that challenge would allow Adam and Chava to channel their efforts to subordinating their nature to the will of Hashem throughout all the challenges they would face in life.

This may help us explain the significance of the laws of chometz and matzah too. The Gemara (Berachos 17a) refers to the yetzer hara, the evil inclination, as the se'or sheb'isa, the yeast of the dough. What is the connection between yeast and the yetzer hara? It is the yeast that allows the dough to rise and give it its tempting appearance and delicious taste. The matzah, lacking yeast, has no such tantalizing attraction. The yetzer hara does the same thing. It takes that which is banal and corrupt and dresses it as something beautiful and alluring. By overcoming the temptation of evil man vanquishes the yetzer hara.

The goal of the freedom from Egypt was for the Jewish people to be able to fulfill their unique mission in becoming a holy nation. In the same manner that Adam was instructed upon his creation to achieve the goal of moral perfection by controlling his desires for food, the Children of Israel were also instructed how to achieve their mission through dietary laws. Upon leaving Egypt they were not even given enough time to bake their bread, and they could only take matzah to eat. This was to teach them not stray from the will of Hashem and follow their desires. Each year as we celebrate the birth of our nation, we recall that momentous occasion by overcoming temptation and avoiding any connection to chometz, even ownership. Even what we do eat at the Seder is strictly regulated—the unleavened matzah, bitter herbs, and four cups of wine. All the food that is eaten must be free of any contact with chometz. After eating the Afikoman, too, no food or drink is permitted at all. By disciplining our instinctive appetite for food we learn to control ourselves in all areas of life.

This may help us understand an enigmatic statement from the Arizal. He says that if one is careful to avoid even the tiniest amount of chometz during Pesach, he will be protected from sin throughout the entire year. How is the sin of eating chometz related to all other sins? The answer is that yielding to the temptation of chometz accustoms a person to yielding to the temptations of the yetzer hara in other places too. Eating matzah, on the other hand, represents eating what is necessary while avoiding the unnecessary temptations. The meticulous observance of the laws of chometz helps a person curb his appetites in other areas too, thus overcoming the challenges set by the yetzer hara.

May we merit to observe the laws of Pesach properly and thereby reap their benefits. 🕊