

# Hametz, matzah, and liberation

by Rabbi Jill Jacobs, Jewish Funds for Justice • March 30th, 2007

Many of us have spent the past month eating little but pasta, in a desperate attempt to finish off our *hametz* (leavened products) before Pesach, which begins this coming Monday evening. In thinking about the transition from eating even more *hametz* than I ordinarily eat to eating no *hametz* for eight days, I cannot help but wonder about the relative natures of *hametz* and its opposite, *matzah*.

Even small children know that we eat *matzah* on Pesach because the Israelites fled Egypt without enough time to let their bread rise, and therefore found themselves subsisting on unleavened crackers. The more mystically inclined among us might add that *hametz* represents all of the bad “stuff” of which we would like to rid ourselves.

It is clear that while *matzah* may commemorate the exodus from Egypt, it does not only represent the baking malfunction that accompanied a speedy exit. That *matzah* has some other dimension becomes abundantly clear throughout the book of *Vayikra* (Leviticus), which redefines *matzah* as the preferred side dish to the sacrifices.

In *parashat Tzav*, God describes the “meal offering” (a sacrifice of grain) as follows:

And this is the law of the meal offering; the sons of Aaron shall offer it before Adonai, before the altar. And he shall take of it his handful, of the flour of the meal offering, and of its oil, and all the frankincense which is upon the meal offering, and shall burn it upon the altar for a sweet savor, the memorial part of it, to Adonai. And Aaron and his sons shall eat its remainder; it shall be eaten with unleavened bread in the holy place; they shall eat it in the court of the Tent of Meeting. It shall not be baked with leaven. I have given it to them for their portion of my offerings made by fire; it is most holy, as is the sin offering, and the guilt offering. (Lev. 6:7-10)

This is neither the first, nor the last, time that God will instruct the priests either to offer the sacrifice with *matzah*, or to make sure that the grain sacrifice does not become *hametz*. Given the popular association between *matzah* and Pesach, we might expect the text somehow to link this offering with the exodus from Egypt. But no such luck.

Absent any textual acknowledgment of the connection between the sacrifices and the exodus, we need to find some other reason for the prohibition against involving offering hametz to God.

We find the beginnings of an answer (or perhaps just more questions) in the text in front of us: First of all, the prohibition against *hametz* appears to be connected to the fact that the offering takes place within the sacred space of the *ohel mo'ed* (tent of meeting). Leavened products, it seems, cannot enter such a holy space. Second, there is a suggestion that the *matzah* itself is a gift from God.

We have, then, a sense that there is something intrinsically holy about *matzah* and something intrinsically profane about *hametz*.

I have heard the suggestion that the problem with *hametz* is that it is inherently gross. That is—when dough sits outside to rise (as it would have, before the days of hygienic Formica kitchens), it naturally picks up dirt, random debris in the air, and maybe even a few bugs for added protein. For this reason, leavened bread—though perhaps tastier—is unfit to serve to an honored guest. When, for example, an angel appears to Gideon, in the book of Shofetim, Gideon rushes to prepare and serve matzah. New bread is, by definition, unleavened, and therefore unblemished.

The *Meshekh Hokhmah* (Rabbi Meir Simcha of Dvinsk, 1843-1926) suggests that the priests are commanded to eat *matzah* with the sacrifices because this is the food that “their master”—namely God—eats. *Matzah* is divine food, whereas *hametz* carries with it all of the impurities of the world.

But still—what is it about *matzah* that makes it divine?

In multiple places, the Torah contrasts *matzah* with idol worship. Most strikingly, in a text that we read a few weeks ago, God commands: “do not make molten idols; observe the holiday of *matzot*.” (Exodus 34:17-18)

What do these two things have to do with one another? Why is *hametz* associated with idol worship, while *matzah* is associated with God.

Ultimately, the problem with idol worship is that it represents an inability to see beyond the tangible, physical world. In a famous midrash, Abraham looks around the world and realizes that there must be some other power beyond the sun, moon, and stars that the people around him are worshiping. Later, the Israelites who have left Egypt demonstrate that they have not quite acclimated to freedom when they build and worship a golden calf, thereby demonstrating their inability to believe in an entity that they cannot see.

*Hametz* represents an attachment to what is—to the world as it appears to our five senses. Those stuck in the world of *hametz* may find themselves drawn to idol worship—that is, the assumption that the world as we see it is all that is possible. *Matzah*, on the other hand, represents the ability to imagine a world beyond the tangible one.

We generally refer to the holiday coming next week as Pesach, a word that refers to God’s passing over the houses of the Israelites during the last of the ten plagues. The Torah, on the other hand, generally refers to the holiday as *Hag haMatzot*—the holiday of *matzah*. From the point of view of the Haggadah and many of our other liturgical texts, God deserves full credit for bringing the Israelites out of Egypt; from another perspective, however, the Israelites merit the redemption from Egypt because they manage to bake *matzah*. That is—they manage to transcend the world as it is, to enter the divine world, and thereby to realize the possibility of liberating themselves from what has always been.