YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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In memory of Pinhas ben Shalom (Paul) Cymbalista z”l  
Niftar 20 Nissan 5752.  
Dedicated by his family.  
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These Pesach Shiurim are dedicated in memory of Sidney Gontownik,   
brother of Jerry Gontownik,   
on the occasion of Sidney's upcoming tenth Yahrzeit, on the 24th of Nissan.  
May his memory be for a blessing.  
The Gontownik Family  
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Dedicated in memory of  
HaRav HaGaon R. Chaim Heller zt"l,  
whose yahrzeit falls on the 14th of Nissan,  
by Vivian S. Singer.  
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**The Mitzva of Matza**

**By Dr. Alan Jotkowitz**

The final chapter of Tractate *Pesachim*, *Arvei Pesachim*, opens with the following ruling:

On the eve of Passover, from close to the time for afternoon prayers, a person may not eat, until it becomes dark.

What is the reason that one is not allowed to eat from about *Mincha* time (in this case, referring to about halfway between midday and sunset) on Erev Pesach?

Rashi (BT *Pesachim* 99b, s.v. *Lo yokhal*) writes: "So that one will be able to eat the matza of mitzva with an appetite, because of *hiddur mitzva* (the beautification of the commandment).”

The Gemaraimmediately asks what is so special about Erev Pesach; after all, according to Rabbi Yehuda, there is always a prohibition on eating a meal in the afternoon preceding either Shabbat or Yom Tov, as this will ruin one’s appetite.

The Rambam writes in *Hilkhot Shabbat* 30:4:

Out of respect for the Sabbath, it is forbidden to plan a meal or a party for Friday. [According to the letter of the law,] one may eat or drink until nightfall. Nevertheless, as an expression of honor for the Sabbath, a person should refrain from planning a meal from the time for afternoon prayers and onward, so that he will enter the Sabbath with an appetite.

Likewise, in *Hilkhot Shevitat Yom Tov* 6:16, he writes:

Just as it is a mitzva to honor the Sabbath and to take delight in it, so too, do [these obligations apply to] all the holidays, as it says: “Sanctified unto God and honored." [This applies to] all the holidays, for they are called "holy convocations." We have explained the obligation implied by honor and delight in *Hilkhot Shabbat*.

Similarly, it is proper for a person not to partake of a [significant] meal on the eve of a holiday from the time for afternoon prayers and onward, as on Friday. For this is also an expression of honor.

As opposed to Rashi, the Rambam feels the prohibition to eat on Erev Shabbat or Erev Yom Tov is based on the mitzva of honoring Shabbat and Yom Tov, which is primarily observed by preparing for Shabbat and Yom Tov.

However according to both Rashi and the Rambam, based on the Gemara in *Pesachim* 107b, one is allowed to eat foods such as fruit or meat on Erev Pesach.

There is also another prohibition related to not eating on Erev Pesach. The Yerushalmi (*Pesachim* 10:1) states:

Rabbi Chiya taught: A person is not allowed to taste anything until it becomes dark.

Rabbi Levi said: Whoever eats matza on the eve of Passover is like one who has relations with his betrothed in his father-in-law’s house, and whoever has relations with his betrothed in his father-in-law’s house incurs lashes.

However, Rabbi Yosei disagrees with Rabbi Yehuda; the former rules that one is allowed to eat until nightfall on Erev Shabbat and Erev Yom Tov. Nevertheless, he agrees with Rabbi Yehuda that one is not allowed to do so on Erev Pesach “because of the obligation of matza" on the first night of Pesach (BT *Pesachim* 99b). The Rashbam ad loc. explains:

“Because of the obligation of matza” — That it should not be eaten when one is full. The obligation of matza on the first night is binding, as it is written (*Shemot* 12:18), “In the evening, you shall eat *matzot*.”

The Rashbam does not explain why matza should not be eaten when one is full or why Rabbi Yosei feels Erev Pesach is different than any other Erev Yom Tov. Why should the fact that one eats the matza when one is full impact on the fulfillment of the mitzva?Perhaps it is due to the unique nature of the mitzva of matza.

The Gemara on *Pesachim* 36a cites the view of Rabbi Akiva:

For what purpose does the Torah state that matza is “the bread of privation (*lechem oni*)” (*Devarim* 16:3)? To exclude the use of dough kneaded with wine, oil or honey.

Matza has to be the bread of privation, and this is why dough kneaded with liquids other than water is disqualified for the mitzva as *matza ashira* — matza which is rich or luxurious.

Perhaps, if the making of matza has to symbolize poverty and servitude, the eating of matza on the first night of Pesach had to reflect this as well. To fulfill the mitzva of matza, it has to be eaten as a slave eats bread, in a state of hunger and desperation.

Let us consider the case of the Amora Rav Sheshet, which the Gemara raises on *Pesachim* 108a:

Rav Sheshet used to sit and fast the whole of the eve of Passover...

Rav Sheshet was different, for he was delicate, and if he ate anything in the morning his food would not benefit him in the evening.

The Gemara does not explain the nature of Rav Sheshet’s fast. According to one opinion of Tosafot (s.v. *Rav Sheshet*), Rav Sheshet did not actually proclaim a formal fast, he just refrained from eating from the morning of Erev Pesach; according to the other explanation he did proclaim a fast, in order to remember to be careful not to eat.

We may suggest that the reason for Rav Sheshet's fast is an extension of the rule of "*lechem oni*." Not only does one have to eat “bread of privation” on the first night of Pesach, but one is also obligated to eat it like a pauper, hungry and ravenous, hence the reason for the fast.

This might also be the understanding of the Rambam, who rules in *Hilkhot Chametz U-matza* 6:12:

The Sages forbade a person from eating matza on the eve of Passover, in order for there to be a distinction between [partaking of it as food] and eating it on the evening [of the fifteen as a mitzva.] Whoever eats matza on the eve of Passover is given stripes for rebellion until his soul expires.

Similarly, it is forbidden to eat on the eve of Passover from close to the time for afternoon prayers, in order that one may approach eating matza with a good appetite. Thus, one may eat some fruit or vegetables, but one should not fill up on them.

The sages of the former generations would starve themselves on the eve of Passover so that they would eat matza with appetite, so the commandants should be dear to him. By contrast, on the eves of the Sabbath or other festivals, one may continue to eat until it becomes dark.

In this one brief rule, the Rambam succinctly presents the ideas we have been discussing.

In the first part, the Rambam discusses the special prohibition about eating matza on Erev Pesach, based on the Yerushalmi’s statement likening it to deflowering one’s betrothed in her father’s house. In the second part of the rule, he discusses the more general concern which applies to moderation in the consumption of any food in this situation. In the third part of the rule, he discusses the custom of the sages to starve themselves on Erev Pesach, perhaps to reflect the idea of eating matza like a pauper.

This perspective on the nature of the mitzva of eating matza is apparently contradicted by the Gemara at the end of Tractate *Pesachim* (119b), expanding on the final *mishna*, which states that: “We may not conclude with an *afikoman* after the paschal offering.” Rav Yehuda quotes Shemuel as saying: “We may not conclude with an *afikoman* after matza.”

An *afikoman* is, essentially, a desert. The Seder cannot conclude with the sort of treats we might expect at the end of a festive meal. Nowadays, we use *afikoman* to refer to the piece of matza we eat at the end of the Seder, despite the fact that we have already eaten matza twice—once on its own, once alongside the bitter herbs, *maror.*

What is the reason we eat matza at the end of the meal? The Rosh explains that it is to remember the *korban pesach*, the paschal offering which in the time of the Temple was eaten at the end of the meal.

Surprisingly, Rashi and the Rashbam rule differently. Rashi ad loc. (s.v. *Ein maftirin*):

For one has to eat matza at the end of the meal, in remembrance of the matza that was eaten with the paschal offering. This is the split matza that we eat at the end in order to fulfill the obligation of matza, the one after eating.

He goes on to explain why we say the *berakha* on the matza consumed at the beginning of the Seder, even though we do not fulfill the mitzva with the first matza we eat.

Apparently, the Rambam *(Hilkhot Chametz U-matza* 8:9) rules similarly, as he writes:

Afterwards, one continues the meal, eating whatever one desires to eat and drinking whatever one desires to drink. At its conclusion, one eats from the paschal sacrifice, even [as small a portion] as the volume of an olive, and does not taste anything afterwards. In this era, one eats an olive’s volume of matza and does not taste anything afterwards.

All this is so that, after the completion of the meal, the taste of the meat of the paschal offering or the matza will [remain] in one's mouth, for **eating them is the commandment.**

This argument between the Rosh and Rashi, the Rashbam and the Rambam is reflected in another disagreement between the Rosh and the Rif about what to do if one has only a *ke-zayit* (olive’s volume) of *matza shemura* (matza made from flour which has been specially guarded from an early stage of production). The Rif (*Pesachim* 27a) maintains that one should use it for the *afikoman,* because he apparently feels that one fulfills the mitzva of matza at the end of the seder, while the Rosh (*Pesachim* 10:35) maintains that one should use it for the first *ke-zayit* eaten at the beginning of the meal.

However, all this is difficult to understand given our previous explanation that matza has to be eaten in a state of hunger, for as the Rashbam explicitly writes, “it should not be eaten when one is full.” How then does one fulfill the mitzva of matza at the end of the seder?

Perhaps this apparent contradiction reflects another Talmudic disagreement found on *Pesachim* 120a. The Gemara records a debate between Rava and Rav Acha bar Ya’akov as to whether the eating of matza after the Destruction of the Temple is a biblical obligation or a rabbinic one.

Rav Acha bar Yaakov maintains that, like the mitzva of eating *maror*, eating matza nowadays is only a rabbinic obligation. Once there is no *korban pesach*, there is no Torah obligation to eat matza or *maror* because the obligation is derived from the verse "With *matzot* and bitter herbs they shall eat it" (*Bamidbar* 9:11) .

Rava agrees that eating *maror* is only a rabbinic obligations but rules that eating matza is still biblically mandated because in addition to the commandment to eat matza with the *korban pesach*, there is an additional independent Torah obligation to eat matza, as commanded by the verse: "In the evening, you shall eat *matzot*" (*Shemot* 12:18).

Halakha follows Rava, but his opinion may be explained in two ways. Is the obligation to eat matza based on the verse “In the evening you shall eat *matzot,*" an independent commandment totally removed from the context of *korban pesach*; or does the verse simply tell us that the eating of matza with the *korban pesach* is a fulfillment of both "With *matzot* and bitter herbs they shall eat it" and “In the evening you shall eat *matzot*"?

According to the first explanation, it makes sense to eat the matza of mitzva at the beginning of the meal, as soon as one has the opportunity, like the Rosh maintains. According to the second explanation, the matza should be eaten at the end of the meal (when the *korban pesach* was eaten in the time of the Temple) as Rashi, the Rashbam and the Rambam hold.

At the Seder, we attempt to fulfill both positions by eating matza at the beginning of the meal and at the end; but there is a fundamental difference in our experiences of eating matza at these two times.

At the beginning of the Seder, we eat the matza as slaves, after declaring: "We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt." We are hungry when we eat the matza after not having eaten all day, and matza, the bread of privation, is what we identify at the very outset of our retelling of the Exodus story: "*Ha lachma anya!*"

At the end of the Seder, we are now freemen. We fulfill the obligation to see ourselves as if we have left Egypt, and this time, matza is eaten on a full stomach.

The eating of matza is thus a perfect reflection of the Seder night, which is a yearly reenactment of the Exodus from Egypt. By eating the matza first as starving paupers and then as free, satiated people, we attempt to relive this monumental event in Jewish history. The mitzva of matza paradoxically represents both slavery and freedom.

There is another lesson to be learned here as well. The same object can represent two extreme human conditions, which should make us realize that it is not our physical possessions which should determine our human emotions or experiences, but rather our mindsets, relationships and spiritual yearnings.

**Postscript**

For many of us, this year's Seder will be a different experience celebrated without extended families; for others, it might even be a solitary event where one sadly has to take the advice of the Gemara and ask the four questions to oneself. The yearly transmission of the *masora*, the tradition, which occurs in many families, will be sorely missed. This year the experience of eating matza as paupers will be keenly felt by many.

We should do what we can to minimize the distress for our family and friends, thereby fulfilling the imperative of "*Kol di-khfin yeitei ve-yeikhol*,” “Let whoever is starving come and eat!” We must also remember the message of the matza: it is not the physical circumstances which determines freedom but rather the mindset of the individual.

May our fulfilment of the mitzva of matza, eaten as slaves and as free people, be a merit for the Jewish people and the world during these terrible times.

May we soon merit to fulfil the mitzva of "With *matzot* and bitter herbs they shall eat it."

Finally, may we soon merit to see as well the fulfillment of the words of the prophet Zekharya (8:4-5)

Thus says the Lord of hosts:

There shall yet old men and old women sit in the broad places of Jerusalem, every man with his staff in his hand for very age.

And the broad places of the city shall be full of boys and girls, playing in the broad places thereof.