

Parashat Bo בּוֹ

Torah: Exodus 10:1–13:16

Haftarah: Jeremiah 46:13–28

The Significance of Matzah

General Overview

Therefore, even if all of us were wise, all of us people of understanding, all of us learned in Torah, it would still be our obligation to tell the story of the Exodus from Egypt. Moreover, whoever searches deeply into its meaning is considered praiseworthy. (Passover Haggadah)

Where does one begin to comment on such a historically and Biblically significant passage as *Parashat Bo*? There are mountains of material on this section of Exodus, both from the Jewish and from the non-Jewish world. How can any comments we make possibly add to the brilliant insights of sages past? Moreover, how can we have the time and space to remark on all of the significant things contained in this parasha? It is simply impossible!

In light of all of the information that is already so easily available, this commentator wants you to know that any comments we share in the next two portions are done so with the deepest awe of God and fully aware of the truth of the adage that, “We stand on the shoulders of giants.”

Exposition

In this excerpt from Parashat Bo, we will focus on the significance of *matzah*, one of the elements of the Pesach Seder.

The Matzah

Our parasha instructs Israel to eat bread made without a leavening agent for one week. Moreover, in the process, according to v.15, Israel is also told to get rid of all leavening agents for that week from their houses. Why? What does it all mean? Verse 39 gives us one explanation. It says,

With the dough they had brought from Egypt, they baked cakes of unleavened bread. The dough was without yeast because they had been driven out of Egypt and did not have time to prepare food for themselves.

Thus, as with the roasted lamb, the element of time seems to be most important here. There was not enough time for the lamb to cook and for the dough to rise. However, why were the Israelites commanded not to eat leaven for a whole week (Exodus 12:15)? Moreover, why were they not even permitted to have it in their houses when they live in the Land (Exodus 12:19)?

On the one hand, it seems that the text in Exodus does not elucidate these issues. However, upon closer examination, the text indeed provides some important information for us. That information centers around the very word “*matzah*.” “Matzah” (מצה) is a noun that is translated “unleavened bread.” However, the verbal form means “to drain,” or “to drain out.”

This piece of information opens up wonderful doors of understanding for us. By instructing them to eat matzah, God was teaching the ancient Israelites that part of what it meant to leave Egypt was to truly let the vestiges of Egypt be drained out from them. Of course, we are speaking here on a spiritual level. Their bodies would leave the slavery of Egypt, but they needed to be reminded that they needed to leave behind all of the attitudes, behaviour, thinking, and worship that were so characteristic of Egypt. They needed to have those things “drained out” of them, too. Eating unleavened bread was God’s way of reminding them that there was more to leaving Egypt than merely removing their bodies from there.

As the years went by, we learn that leaven became, both in the Bible and in Jewish literature, a symbol for anything not wanted, especially sin. It acquired this meaning, perhaps, because of the meaning of the word matzah, as we have discussed above. The Renewed Covenant Scriptures might be a help here in illustrating this point.

Yeshua spoke about the symbolism of the leaven in a discussion recorded in Matthew 16:6. There He told His students to, “Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees.” In this case, He seemed to be saying that leaven (yeast) was a symbol for things not wanted, or sin.

In addition, after Yeshua had given him a new life, Paul wrote to one of the congregations he had helped to found and encouraged them to get rid of sin from their midst by relating sin to the concept of leaven. Thus, in 1 Corinthians 5:7 he said, “Purge out the old leaven in order that you might be a new lump of dough, in as much as you are matzah. For Messiah our Pesach sacrifice has also been sacrificed for us” (Author’s translation).

Note that our Hebraically minded rabbi, Paul, actually refers to believers as “matzah.” We need to understand these words also in this God-intended meaning. Paul is not saying that believers in Yeshua have become a piece of matzah on a literal level. Rather, he is stating an incredibly important spiritual truth about us. He is teaching us something about who we are by nature because of our union with Messiah and as new creations in Him. Paul is saying that we are matzah! We are those who have had sin drained out of us as new creations. Living as believers is a life of remembering who we are as new creations in Messiah and learning how to walk in that newness of life, that is, how to be matzot (plural of matzah). The key to being able to live this freedom is to deeply know that we are matzot. If we are matzot, then we are to live like the matzot that we are.

Hence, when we eat matzah in our Passover celebrations, we are making two statements. First, we are reminding ourselves that as redeemed people we are no longer in Egypt, but rescued from it. Secondly, we are participating in the truth of who we are in Messiah, that is, we are people who have had unrighteousness and sin drained out of us in Messiah. Eating matzah for the seven days of Unleavened Bread is a way of helping to retrain our minds to think about this vital spiritual reality.

There is a second important point to be made concerning the matzah. The Haggadah reminds us that in Deuteronomy 16:3 the Torah refers to matzah as *lechem 'oni* (לחם עוני). This phrase is commonly translated, “the bread of affliction.” The word *'oni* (עוני) can, indeed, be translated as “affliction.” Add to

this thought that on the night before He was crucified, Yeshua (at a Pesach meal) used a piece of matzah to refer to Himself. In doing so, He declared that He was the “bread of affliction.” For it was prophesied in Isaiah 53:7 that Messiah would be “afflicted” on behalf of sinners. In this prediction Isaiah uses *na'aneh* (נענה), a form of the same Hebrew word translated “affliction” in Deuteronomy 16:3, 'oni (עוני).

However, 'oni can also be rendered “poverty.” If we call matzah “the bread of poverty,” it reminds us that while we were in Egypt, we were, indeed, poor. To be sure, the Israelites had food and shelter. Thus, the poverty is not in reference to their physical lives, but to their spiritual condition. It tells us that as long as one is living in Egypt there is spiritual poverty.

When the Haggadah refers to this bread of affliction or bread of poverty, it enigmatically states,

This is the bread of affliction which our forefathers ate in the land of Egypt. Let all who are hungry come and eat.

It gives an *invitation* for all to come and eat of this bread of affliction/poverty. Why does it do so? Perhaps Yeshua has the answer when he teaches in Matthew 5:3 “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” In other words, let all who see their spiritual poverty come and eat the matzah. What does it mean to “eat” this matzah? Again, it only makes sense when we remember that Yeshua invites us to come and “eat” of Him (John 6:48–51). This does not mean to physically devour Him. It means that we are to take Him in and let Him spiritually nourish our entire being on the deepest level. Doing so would, indeed, satisfy our spiritual poverty.

It is possible to understand *lechem 'oni* in yet a third way. Another meaning for 'oni is to associate it with the Hebrew term meaning “to answer,” *'anah* (ענה).¹ Hence, it can be called “the bread of answers.” If this is correct, then the matzah serves as a stimulus to ask questions and provides the answers at the same time! It helps to stimulate questions by its very presence at the Pesach table. People might ask things such as, “Why do we eat matzah on this occasion?”; “What is the purpose of matzah?”; “What did matzah mean to the ancient Israelites on the first Passover?”

The answers come forth in the ensuing discussion provoked by the questions, a discussion which involves retelling the story of Passover and studying the biblical date concerning it. It is true that this might not be the primary interpretation of 'oni in the context of Deuteronomy 16:3. However, there are some who suggest this way of seeing this.²

We have one final thought about the matzah. Soon after the Temple was destroyed, the matzah became a symbol for the Pesach lamb that could no longer be sacrificed because of the Temple’s absence. Where did the Sages get the idea that the matzah represented the Pesach Lamb?

Could the idea have sprung from the many thousands of Jewish believers who already used matzah as a symbol for the Passover lamb? After all, Yeshua had taught them at what is commonly called by some as the Lord’s Supper, “This bread is My body.”

This “supper” was, most likely, a Pesach Seder that Yeshua was conducting. He was teaching His followers that the matzah (and the other elements) had additional significance than what they already knew. He was telling them that from then on, the wine and the matzah, in particular, would remind them of Himself. In doing so, Yeshua was connecting Himself to the bread of affliction. For He certainly was afflicted for our iniquities as Isaiah 53 said. He was also communicating that, as the Bread of Life (John 6:48), He is the One who satisfies man’s deepest hunger. Therefore, let all who are hungry come and eat!

Of course, we cannot be too dogmatic about our assertion that the idea of connecting the matzah with the symbol for the Pesach lamb was originally derived from the tens of thousands of Messianic Jews who lived in the land of Judea in the second half of the first century, CE. It is a good suggestion, but it lacks solid documentation.

¹ ענה – *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (abridged). Based on *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, by F. Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907. Digitized and abridged as a part of the Princeton Theological Seminary Hebrew Lexicon Project under the direction of Dr. J. M. Roberts. Used by permission. Electronic text corrected, formatted, and hypertexted by OakTree Software, Inc. This electronic adaptation ©2001 OakTree Software, Inc. Version 3.0.

² For example, Rabbi Alan Ullman, head of Rodef Torah School of Jewish Studies in Newton, MA, who first suggested this possibility to our son, Yoel, while he was studying with Rabbi Ullman.