

Pesach 5779/2019 **Our Matzah, Our Selves** **Emily Goldberg Winer**

Around our Seder tables we evoke the experience of slavery in order to heighten our appreciation for freedom. As we recline against pillows we remember that, *Avadim Hayenu*, we were once slaves. As we lean as we refill our cups of wine, we sing about our days of restrictions and plagues. As we chant *Hallel* late into the night, we see the remnants of maror, bitterness, linger on our plates. Even though our seders are about liberation, they are interwoven with memories of our limitations and struggles and it seems as though our work is to navigate both of those truths at the same time. Most of us are free now, but our seders are our testaments to the arduous and messy transformation from degradation to dignity.

The matzoh that we eat embodies the dual nature of the seder. For a *Chag Ha'cheirut*, we sure spend a lot of time embracing a rather strict diet. As taught in Devarim 16:4,

“You cannot see it (bread) or have it be found.”

”לא יראה לך שאר בכל גבלך”

Why is it that we are not permitted to eat or even see chametz on Pesach?

Rambam/Maimonides explains that ridding ourselves of chametz is also a state of mind:

“What is meant by the biblical term putting away? It means that one should regard the *hametz* as nonexistent or as mere dust of the earth, impressing on his mind that he has no *hametz* in his possession” (Mishneh Torah, Laws of Leavened and Unleavened Bread 2:2).

ומה היא השבֵּתה זו האמונה בתורה? היא שיבטל החמץ בלב. ויחשב אותו כעפר וישים בלבו שאין ברשותו חמץ כלל

According to Maimonides, *biur chametz* is both a physical act and an internal process. In terms of actions, we are compelled to fill garbage bags in our kitchens with half-opened bags of pita chips, and designate shelves on our cabinets to isolate our corn-syrupy condiments. In this way, we merge *biur chametz* with annual spring cleaning. But we must also channel this inwardly: we must think of ourselves as entirely chametz-free.

This mindset of *hefkerut*, or ownerlessness means that our bread does not belong to us. Whether we have sold it through our communities or burned it to a crisp, we must relinquish the chametz which is the convenience that hinders us from truly experiencing *Mitzrayim's* narrowness on our own backs. The fluffy delicacies we consume every other day of the year must be cleared away in order for us to nourish ourselves in the only *kemach* (flour) that we need: the sustenance of Torah. This is the route to the glory of freedom, chosenness, and partnership with God.

In his command to clear away chametz Rambam evokes language of deep humility, comparing that which we own to the dust of the earth. On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we take this a step further and compare ourselves to the dust of the earth. As we recite the *Unetane Tokef* we stand in awe before our own mortality and say *לְעָפָר וְסוּפוֹ לְעָפָר* or “we come from dust and return to dust.”

The dust of the earth is not only the element that we came from and to which we will return; it is the paradigm for our state of mind along the way. We constantly remember that—like the bread we clear from

our cabinets and shelves— we were formed from crumbs. If it is our very own chametz that prevents us from this kind of raw humility, then the process of *bedikat chametz* (checking) and *biur chametz* (burning) can be a corrective.

So what does this painstaking process of crouching on our kitchen floors to gather every last crumb lead to? *Achilat Matzah* (Eating of Matzoh). Rebbe Nachman of Breslov refers to matzah as a source of true joy and excitement. According to his teachings on the laws of Pesach:

“This is why matza is called *lechem oni*, because we answer (*onim*) many things over it, (i.e, the voices shouted above the matza at the recitation of the Haggadah), and this shows us that we can use the Matza to shout out to God” (Likutei Halachot, Orach Hayim, Pesach 3:2)

וְזֶהוּ בְּחִינַת שְׂנֵקְרָא הַמְצָה לְחֶם עֲנִי,
 שְׂעוּנִין עָלָיו דְּבָרִים הַרְבֵּה, הִינּוּ בְּחִינַת
 הַקּוֹלוֹת שְׂצוּעֵקִין עַל הַמְצָה בְּסִפּוּר
 הַהֲגָדָה. לְהוֹרוֹת שְׂעַל-יְדֵי הַמְצָה יְכוּלִים
 לְצַעֵק אֶל ה'

Our ancestors carried the ingredients of bread on their backs on their way out of slavery without any time for it to rise, but their voices tell their redemption stories through them. Passover is a time for us to relive and experience liberation, but these binding requirements put freedom in check. They command us to ground our freedom in matzoh and literally taste our ancestors' restrictions with each crunch.

Perhaps Pesach would be easier and more liberating if our bread's oven time could reflect the hours we dedicate to our seder meal. However, it is the matzoh's firmness that invites us to do the spiritual leavening as we retell our narrative, holding both the bitterness and joy of our exodus story. Through the restrictions of Pesach, we pause to remind ourselves that God forms life from the things that we let become dust. Through the mitzvah of matzah, we allow our journey to freedom to shout off the backs of our people, through the pages of the Haggadah, and into our hands—complete in their eighteen-minute haste.

May this Pesach and our *achilat matzah* give us the opportunity to rise.



Emily Goldberg Winer was born and raised in South Florida, but moved to New York City in high school. She loves community building and sharing Torah with people from all walks of life and across generations. She currently works as the intern at Congregation Beth Sholom in Potomac, Maryland. Her most recent positions include rabbinic intern at the Columbia/Barnard Hillel, visiting chaplain at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, community educator at Brandeis, and teen coordinator at the Hebrew Home of Riverdale. She completed the Jewish Innovation Fellowship at the 92nd Street Y, the Join for Justice Fellowship, and the rabbinic student fellowship at Shalom Hartman Institute. A Wexner Graduate Fellow and Master's student at Yeshiva University, Emily loves pluralism and interfaith dialogue. She has engaged in programs rooted in religious diversity, first among fellow Jews at the Bronfman Youth Fellowship and Drisha, and later across faiths at the Institute for Jewish-Christian Understanding, Tanenbaum, and Auburn Seminary. She graduated Magna Cum Laude from Muhlenberg College in Allentown, PA with degrees in Religion and Jewish Studies. She lives in Riverdale with her husband Jonah, a student at YCT, and together they can be found petting dogs, adding puns into regular conversations, and facetimeing their friends' grandparents.