PESAH: Why Matza?

In just a few days, on Wednesday, April 5th, in the evening, we will begin the celebration of Pesach. As mentioned below, there are eight biblical precepts in Pesach. The first two are “Telling the story of our redemption from Egypt ” and “Consuming Matsa.” In the following lines, we will try to understand this second commandment a little better.

The most characteristic Mitsva of Pesach is the consumption of Matsa. The Matsa replaces the “bread,” and in fact, it is a “bread,” but flat and with no spongy crumb. It is made without waiting for the dough to rise through the normal fermentation process and without adding yeast. Now then, why do we eat Matsa on Pesach?

There are two reasons. One of them is explicitly mentioned in the Tora. The second reason, less known, is briefly mentioned at the beginning of the Haggada that we read at the Seder.

THE POOR MAN’S BREAD (□□□□ □□□)

Let’s start with what the Haggada says. For many years, when we lived enslaved in Egypt, we only ate Matsa: breakfast, lunch, and dinner. This low-cost “bread” – called at the beginning of the Haggada ‘Lachmá aniyá or ‘poor man’s bread’ – has no yeast, salt, or additives. The Matsa was the food conceived by the cruel Egyptian masters as the ideal food for Jewish slaves. It was not a nutritious or balanced meal, but it was digested slowly and lasted longer in the stomachs of Jewish slaves, who thus complained less about hunger. Matsa was also the lowest-cost food that could be produced: all that was needed to prepare Matsa was flour and water, two of the cheapest and most abundant elements on the banks of the Nile. In selecting the Matsot as the food for slaves, there was an additional purpose related to the psychological torture of the Jews: the time factor. Normally, to produce a common bread,

the dough should rest for about 20 minutes, and only then, once the dough rises due to fermentation, it is placed in the oven. But the Egyptian masters did not want to give the Jews a twenty minutes lunchtime: the Hebrew slaves had to prepare the dough and bake it immediately, as it was, so no work time was going to waste. The improvised flat “bread” obtained thru this process was flavorless and did not have the smell of freshly baked bread, a luxury reserved for the masters. We probably ate Matsot in this way for at least three or four generations. The Haggadah reminds us of this by indicating that the Matsa we eat at the Seder “is the bread of poverty that our ancestors ate in Egypt.” The experience of eating only Matsa for so many years, and its psychological effect, was engraved in our memory. When we eat the Matsa, we reexperience the flavor of captivity.

THE OTHER MATSA

The explicit reason that the Tora mentions regarding Matsa is different: at the time of our exodus from Egypt, “we also ate Matsa.” Why? Because the order to leave Egypt occurred ‘suddenly’ (bechipazón), on the night of the 15th of Nisan, after the last plague, when Pharaoh finally gave in after so many refusals and negotiations, practically expelling us from his territory. The exodus from Egypt was a “lightning operation” that lasted only a few hours. Let’s try to visualize it: we have to get ready to leave our homes for ever and leave behind all our possessions. We know we are going to the desert, but we don’t know for how long we are going to walk. The most urgent thing we need, apart from water, is food for the journey. And we have just a couple of hours to get ready. We need to prepare as much food as possible in no time: who can patiently wait twenty minutes for each dough to rise? And so, when we left Egypt, we did not take bread with us but carried the Matsot on our shoulders. This event created an emotional memory in our DNA that the Tora immortalized with the commandment to eating Matsot at the Pesach Seder. Many

Sephardim Jews dramatize this unforgettable event repeating at the Seder the words of the Tora □□□□□□ □□□□□□□. Watch this video of a teacher in a Sephardic school in Mexico teaching his students to pretend taking the Matsot on their shoulder and say (in Arabic): Where do you come from? From Egipt. And where are you going? To Yerushalayim!

DID YOU KNOW THIS?

Some time ago, while teaching Masechet Rosh Hashanah, I noticed a detail that I hadn't paid attention to it in previous years. The Sages say that our slavery did not end on Pesach, that is, in the month of Nisan: the forced labor was interrupted on Rosh haShana of that year, that is, 6 months before the departure from Egypt (this fact is also referenced in the psalm of Tehillim that we recite on Rosh haShanah □□□□ □□□□ □□□□□□□). If so, I suppose that once our slavery ended, we began to consume "normal egyptian bread", that is, fermented bread. But now, that we had to prepare to leave Egypt in a hurry, ironically, we were forced to bake the "poor man's bread" again… But as we explained it, this time the Matsa had a different flavor: the taste of the freedom that was taking place hastily, in front of our eyes.

THE DOUBLE TASTE OF MATSA

The Matsa then represents both the bitterness of slavery and the sweet taste of our providential freedom. On the one hand, we remember the affliction we suffered as slaves in Egypt. When eating Matsa, we celebrate our redemption without forgetting our suffering. And on the other hand, our exodus from Egypt was not the result of a progressive "revolution" that fermented in the people over several years, and whose final outcome occurred after endless battles… We were rescued by the Creator in a Divine act of redemption, irrepetible in the history of humanity.