The Meanings of Matsa

The most characteristic Mitsva of Pesach is to consume Matsa (in English: matzah"). Matsa replaces ordinary "bread." And it is, in fact, a type of "bread," flat, with no salt, and without the soft, inner part of the bread (=crumb). It is made without waiting for the dough to rise through the normal fermentation process and without adding yeast.

So, why do we eat Matsa on Pesach?

There are two reasons. The Tora explicitly mentions the first reason, and the second, lesser-known reason is briefly mentioned at the beginning of the Haggada, the text we read at the Seder.

BREAD FOR SLAVES (□□□□ □□□)

Let's start with what the Haggada says. For many years, when we lived enslaved in Egypt, we ate exclusively Matsa for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. This inexpensive "bread", called by the Haggada *Lachman Aniya*, "the poor bread" or "the poor's bread," had no yeast, no salt, and no additives. The Egyptians conceived Matsa as the ideal food for the working Jews: Matsa is digested slowly and lasts longer in the slaves' stomachs, who complained less about hunger. Matsa was also the lowest-cost food that could be produced: flour and water were two of the cheapest and most abundant elements on the Nile's banks. In addition, there was an element of deprivation and a virtual mental torture of the Jewish slaves. **Eating Matsa meant that there was no lunch break**. Typically, the dough is left to rest for about 20 minutes to produce ordinary bread. Once the dough rises through fermentation, it is placed in the oven and turned into delicious bread. However, the Egyptian slave masters did not grant the Jewish slaves those 20 minutes of rest. The Hebrew slaves had to prepare the dough, bake it on the spot, and return to work immediately (or perhaps, they

were forced to eat Matsa “while” they were working…). The Haggada reminds us of this by pointing out that the Matsa we eat at the Seder “is the bread of affliction 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, and when we tried it, we relived the taste of captivity.

THE SECOND TIME WE ATE MATSA

The explicit reason that the Tora mentions regarding Matsa is different: at the time of our departure from Egypt, we ate Matsa. Why? The final order to leave Egypt occurred “at the last moment” (*bechipazon*) between Nisan 14 and 15, after the last plague when Pharaoh and the Egyptians felt forced to expel us from their territory. Leaving Egypt was an operation that lasted hours, not days. Let’s try to visualize it: we must take the essentials with us and leave all our belongings behind. We need food to travel the desert. The journey will take several weeks or months, and we must prepare as much food as possible. Who knows when we will have time, and whatever is needed, to make food again! When we are about to leave and pack just our essentials, do we have time to wait twenty minutes between bread and bread until the dough rises? Probably not. We had to make as much bread as possible for the journey, as fast as possible, so we just made the dough flat.

WHEN DID SLAVERY END?

Masechet Rosh HaShanah mentions a detail that sheds light on the two reasons for the Matsa that I just explained. I always wondered “why was the bread of the exodus different from the bread the Jews ate all other days because Jews ate Matsa uninterruptedly. The Sages explained that our slavery did not end on Passover, that is, in the month of Nisan: forced labor was interrupted on Rosh haShana of that year! That is, 6 months before leaving Egypt. This event is referenced in the Tehillim Psalm 81, which we recite on the night of Rosh

Hashanah (□□□□ □□□□ □□□□□□□). If so, once slavery ended, our ancestors consumed fermented or ordinary “Egyptian bread”! But ironically, when we had to leave Egypt in a hurry, we were ordered to consume again “poor people’s bread” or “Jewish bread.” But this time, we ate Matsa for a different reason. This time, the Matsa did not have the bitter flavor of slavery but the taste of freedom that was taking place swiftly and miraculously in front of our eyes.

THE DOUBLE TASTE OF MATSA

The Matsa represents both the bitterness of slavery and the sweet taste of our providential freedom. By eating the Matsa, we celebrate our redemption without forgetting our suffering. On the one hand, we remember the affliction we suffered as slaves in Egypt. And on the other hand, we recall our departure from Egypt. Which was not the consequence of a progressive “revolution” that fermented in the Jewish people over several years, and whose outcome occurred after endless battles…. Bore Olam rescued us in a swift act of redemption, unrepeatable in human history.