

Three Matzot

Of all the matzah that is eaten during Passover, there are three that are most significant. These are the three matzot that are placed on a plate separate from the seder plate and displayed within a special napkin or matzah cover, usually embroidered, and typically used once a year simply for this purpose. The top matzah is called the Keter, or Crown. The middle matzah is called the Hokhmah, or Wisdom. The bottom matzah is called the Binah, or Intelligence.

There are many different interpretations for the symbolic meaning of these matzot. The traditional interpretation is that the top, Keter, and the bottom, Binah, represent the double portion of manna that fell the day before the Sabbath for the Israelites in the wilderness. The middle matzah, Hokhmah, which eventually yields the Afikomen, represents the Exodus and is the “bread of poverty.” Poor people usually break their bread and share it, or they break off one piece of their bread and put away the other piece for a later meal.¹ Likewise, the Hokhmah is divided in two during the Seder with one part being replaced on the plate and the other, the Afikomen, being set aside or hidden, later to be found and redeemed. The word *matzah* (מצה) is a verb whose meaning *to find* has not changed since Biblical times thus lending credibility to this interpretation.

A second interpretation is that the top matzah, Keter, represents the Cohenim, or priests of the temple. The middle matzah, Hokhmah, represents the Levi'im, or singers and servitors of the temple. The bottom matzah, Binah, represents the Yisraelim, or the congregation of Israel.² This interpretation contains clear references to the ancient Temple and its concentric courtyards of limited access. Thus, in the absence of the Paschal sacrifice, these three matzot remind Jews of the Temple and the ancient sacrifices performed there. In this symbolism, we find one of the ways in which matzah has replaced the Paschal sacrifice in meaning and significance.

A third interpretation is that the Keter and Binah represent the two loaves of shewbread from the temple, typically represented by the two loaves of bread eaten to begin each Sabbath. The Hokhmah represents the Paschal lamb.³ Like the preceding explanation, this too contains reference to the Temple, specifically to one of the items that was contained in the Holy Place (different from the Holy of Holies). The significance of this symbolism is shown in Leviticus where God instructs:

And thou shalt take fine flour and bake twelve cakes thereof: two tenth deals shall be in one cake. And thou shalt set them in two rows, six on a row, upon the pure table before the LORD. And thou shalt put pure frankincense upon each row, that it may be on the bread for a memorial, even an offering made by fire unto the LORD...And it shall be Aaron's and his sons'; and they shall eat it in

¹ Klein, Mordell ed. *Passover* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1973) 52-54

² Levin, Meyer. *An Israel Haggadah for Passover* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc. Publishers, no date) 28, 39

³ Ibid.

the holy place: for it is most holy unto him of the offerings of the LORD made by fire by a perpetual statute.⁴

Given that the shewbread was unleavened bread like matzah, this interpretation draws an even more direct connection between the matzah and the Paschal sacrifice. Not only does the middle matzah of the three specifically represent the Paschal sacrifice, but also the outer two matzot indirectly represent the same. Some rabbis even feel that the matzah that is eaten just preceding the eating of bitter herbs should be salted as a reminder that all sacrifices brought to the temple were salted before being burned on the altar. In this way, the matzah further represents the sacrificial lamb.⁵

A fourth interpretation of the three matzot is that they represent the three temples of Jerusalem – the Temple of Solomon, the Second Temple (i.e. – the Temple of Zerubbabel/Herod's Temple), and the future temple that is yet to be built.

Finally, according to Reconstructionist Jews, the three matzot symbolize the early days when all people had little, but none had more – when equality prevailed among the Israelites. They teach that we should find delight not in selfish luxuries that excite the envy of our neighbors, but in acts of helpfulness and kindness that inspire their respect and love.⁶ This interpretation is in line with traditional Reconstructionist thought which focuses on moral behavior, but avoids direct references to deity.

⁴ Leviticus 24:5-7, 9

⁵ Silverman, Rabbi Morris, ed. *Passover Haggadah: New Translation with explanatory notes and original readings* (Hartford: Prayer Book Press, 1959) 33

⁶ Kaplan, Mordecai M. *The New Haggadah* (New York: Behrman House, 1942) 67