

Matzah/Unleavened Bread

Matzah, or unleavened bread, is now the central and most important symbol of Passover having replaced the Paschal sacrifice in meaning and significance. According to the Mishnah, matzah represents the sudden redemption of Israel.¹ Only unleavened bread may be used at Passover time according to the divine injunction in Exodus: “Seven days shall ye eat unleavened bread; even the first day ye shall put away leaven out of your houses: for whosoever eateth leavened bread . . . shall be cut off from Israel.”²

Over the years, Jews have taken this injunction very seriously. In the past, preparation for making the three matzot in Orthodox communities extended all the way back to watching the field where the grain was grown to make sure that none of it became fermented through rotting. In addition, Jews past and present conduct detailed inspections of their homes to ensure that no leaven is present. Over the years, this search for leaven has become highly ritualized even to the extent that several pieces of leavened bread are strategically placed throughout the home to ensure that some leaven is found and removed.

Today matzot are typically made in factories under the supervision of a rabbi and then pronounced and labeled “kosher for Passover.” While this requires less effort on the part of Passover celebrants, the supervising rabbis closely scrutinize the production process and the matzah still undergoes special treatment to ensure there is no leaven. For example, every matzah must be perforated using a wheel with pointed teeth, called a reidel. This prevents any rising that might occur during the baking. Many people have found this to be representative of the kind of process we as people must undergo in order to eliminate the leaven, or pride, from our lives.³

Throughout the Seder, the matzah is to be displayed uncovered except when the wine is lifted; then it is covered. This tradition has arisen because according to the order of berachoth (blessings), bread has preference over wine. Thus, whenever wine is taken in hand on Passover, the matzah should be covered in order to not “slight” it. In addition, the wine symbolizes freedom while the matzah reminds Jews of their former bondage. Therefore, they cover the one while raising the other.⁴

¹ *Mishnah*. Pesachim 10:9

² Exodus 12:15

³ Levin, Meyer. *An Israel Haggadah for Passover* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc. Publishers, no date) 28, 39

⁴ Davis, Rabbi Avrohom. *The Metsudah Linear Passover Haggadah* (Hoboken: KTAV Publishing House, 1993) 12, 47