

THE REASON FOR MATZAH ON PASSOVER IS CLEAR, BUT WHY NO CHAMETZ WHATSOEVER?

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Indeed, the above is the first question asked at the Passover Seder ceremony: “(Why is it that) on all other nights we may eat *Chametz* (leavened bread) and *Matzah* (unleavened bread) whereas on this night (of Passover) only *matzah*?¹ Clearly, the question is not only, why do we eat *matzah* but also, why are we forbidden to eat *chametz*? However, the curious fact is that in all of the material related at the Seder, this basic question is not addressed. Furthermore, even the authoritative teaching of Rabban Gamliel explaining the basic rituals of Passover does not touch on this question: “this *matzah* which we eat is because there was no time for the dough of our ancestors to leaven before God revealed Himself and redeemed them.”² Thus, the eating of *matzah* on Passover comes to commemorate the speed by which Israel went from slavery to freedom, i.e “in the short time it takes for dough to leaven.” This of course explains the significance of *matzah* but sheds no light on the prohibition of *chametz* which is so severe that *whosoever eats chametz from the first day until the seventh day (of Passover) that soul shall be cut off from Israel* (Ex. 12:14).

In what follows I will show that implicit in the very events that led to the eating of *matzah* can be found the reason for the prohibition of *chametz*. However, because it exposed a reluctance on the part of the Israelites to leave Egypt, the Rabbis chose to let it remain unnoticed by those at the Seder table engrossed in the unfolding of the drama of the Exodus.

The first clue for this thesis may be found in the verse offered by Rabban Gamliel as his proof text: *And they baked the dough that they brought out of Egypt into cakes of unleavened bread because it had not leavened because they were driven out of Egypt and they could not tarry nor had they prepared any provisions for themselves* (Ex. 12:39).

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While this verse certainly bears out Rabban Gamliel's assertion that there was insufficient time for the dough of the Israelites to leaven, which explains why we eat the *matzah*, it also reveals why there was not enough time: *because they were driven out of Egypt*. It will be remembered that after the severe tenth plague of the First Born we were told *and the Egyptians were urgent upon the people to send them out of the land in haste for they said, we are all dead men* (Ex. 12:33). Evidently, Rabban Gamliel believed this fact to be irrelevant to his question. However, I shall show that it is very relevant to the question of why a prohibition of *chametz*. Furthermore, the last few words of that verse: *and they could not tarry nor did they prepare for themselves any provisions* raises some disquieting questions: why would they wish to tarry and why did they not prepare provisions for the journey ahead? This suggests that the Exodus from Egypt for the individuals on the ground was not some triumphant march but rather a somewhat disorderly departure under heavy pressure.

For a better understanding, we must reconstruct the sequence of events leading to and including that fateful evening, the *lail sheemurim* (night of watching),³ the evening of the 14th of the Spring month when a newly liberated clan of twelve tribes took their first steps to nationhood under God. We shall do this with special attention to what and when the Israelites were told about the events to come and how they were told to prepare. With the breakdown of negotiations between Moses and Pharaoh after the plague of Darkness, Moses is told by God *yet one plague more will I bring upon Pharaoh and Egypt afterwards he will let you go* (Ex. 11:1).

The first thirteen verses of Exodus 12,⁴ which immediately follows, are for the Israelites in Egypt and deal with the Pascal Lamb ritual, which is to be performed on that evening. They are also informed as to what is to occur to Pharaoh and the Egyptians that night. Referring to the communal meal of the Pascal Lamb, they are instructed: *And thus shall you eat it: with your loins girded, your shoes on your feet and your staffs in your hand and you shall eat it in haste (be-hi-pazone), it is the Lord's Passover* (Ex. 12:11).⁵

Since these instructions are given in real time, they are clearly meant to be taken literally, that is, to be ready to leave Egypt immediately after the Pascal ritual. Thus, the very eating of the Lamb is to be *in haste*. If so then the im-

plication of *they could not tarry* cited earlier becomes even more puzzling.

Let us now reconsider the explanation of Rabban Gamliel and the origin and purpose of the “dough” that did not have enough time to leaven. From the proof text we learned that it was the dough *they brought out of Egypt* which means that it had been prepared while still in Egypt! But at what point and for what purpose? The Pascal meal itself had to be consumed in its entirety that night. So why start a new baking? Clearly it was not to provide food for the journey since we are told *neither did they provide provisions for themselves* (Ex. 12:39.) I would suggest that while they had indeed been told to prepare for a departure after the Pascal Lamb ceremony, they saw no reason to rush as their oppressors had been dealt a decisive blow. Therefore they started to leisurely prepare their usual breakfast of freshly baked bread (*chametz*), which was the staple diet of ancient Egypt.⁶ This would explain, *and they could not tarry* as they wished to have their breakfast first. However, since they had been told to be ready to leave the country, their failure to prepare provisions (*tzaida*, Ex. 12:11) which in context broadly means “the needs of the journey” calls for a deeper explanation. Possibly, they were relying on their miracle-producing leaders Moses and Aaron to provide the necessities for the journey. This would explain the repeated and almost violent complaints of the Israelites for the lack of food and water (Exodus 16:3, Numbers 11:5). However, I would suggest that the radical idea of leaving Egypt permanently and embarking upon an unchartered journey had never really made it onto their real-life agendas. Regardless of the abuses and constraints of life in Egypt, it had become the norm and second nature for generations of Israelites.

If the above is correct, then in the context of the story of Passover, leavened dough or *chametz* has come to symbolize in the collective consciousness of the Jewish people, the insidious power of ingrained habit, of a desire for the normality of “business as usual”, to impede movement towards improvement, to blind one to historic opportunity, to deafen an entire nation to the *knocking of the Beloved* (Song of Songs 5:2). *Chametz* and *matzah* had a dialectical relationship. *Matzah* represents the ability of Providence to transform a no-way out situation of abject slavery into a four-dimensional Redemption,⁷ while *chametz* symbolizes the tendency to resist change, seek interminable

delays and prefer sedentary stay-put to a unique opportunity for growth. So, in order to celebrate Passover, the miraculous founding of Israel as a nation, matzah becomes the staple for the seven days of the Festival during which time we may neither “see nor eat” *chametz* so that we might remember that a desire for breakfast as usual almost caused us to miss the opportunity of the centuries.

Noting the incongruity of celebrating an event In which a God delivered his people, *one nation out of the midst of another nation with signs and wonders* (Deut. 4:34), but which nation had to gulp down the thanksgiving Pascal meal “in haste” (*be-he-pazone*), the prophet Isaiah promised that in the future Redemption *You shall not go out in haste (be-he-pazone) nor shall you flee, for the Lord your God shall go before you* (Isa. 52:12).

NOTES

1. This is the first of the familiar Four Questions (*ma nish tana*) usually recited by a child at the Seder ceremony. It was designed to actualize the often repeated biblical text *and it shall be if your child shall ask you on the morrow* (Ex. 13:14). It was also to involve children in the proceedings of the evening.
2. Mishna *Pesachim* 10:5. This version which appears in most Passover Haggadot is that of Maimonides.
3. This is the JPS 1952 translation. It fails to capture the nuance of “expectation” (see Genesis 37:11) as well as the sense of “guarding” which are implicit in the root *shmr*. The experience of the Israelites that night was one of great expectations as it was one of Divine protection. See comment of Rashi on that verse.
4. Chapter 12 begins with a revelation by God to Moses and Aaron with instructions for the Israelites, verses 1 to 20, how to prepare for the Pascal Lamb ceremony on the 14th of the month. They are also to be told of the last plague to be brought upon Pharaoh and the Egyptians at midnight of the 14th. However, the text from verse 14 to 20 describes how these events are to be commemorated in the future as an annual festival. It is doubtful that any of this latter material was transmitted to the Israelites at that time.
5. While the Mishna in *Pesachim* (9:5) states that the *eating of the lamb in haste* was a feature only of the Egyptian Passover, it makes no mention of *eating it with your loins girded ... etc.* There are Jewish communities that continue to practice it today.
6. The two staples of the diet of the ancient Egyptians were bread and beer which were made from the fermented cereal grains barley and emmer wheat. Stephen Quirke, Jeffery Spencer, *Ancient Egypt* (British Museum, 1992), p. 17.
7. The Four Expressions of Redemption in Exodus 6: 4-7 are generally interpreted as four successive steps or stages, physical and psychological in Israel’s liberation from Egyptian bondage.



עַשְׂתָה תּוֹרַתְךָ קֶבָע

THE TRIENNIAL BIBLE READING CALENDAR

DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF CHAIM ABRAMOWITZ

October	Genesis	37 – 50
	Exodus	1 – 14
November	Exodus	15 – 40
	Leviticus	1 – 2
December	Leviticus	3 – 27
	Numbers	1 – 3
January	Numbers	4 – 31
February	Numbers	32 – 36
	Deuteronomy	1 – 23

