

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Parshat Bo

With the final plague G-d brought about our freedom. "It was midnight. G-d killed every first-born in Egypt...[Pharaoh] sent for Moshe and Aaron during the night. 'Get moving!' he said. 'Get out from among my people - you and the Israelites! Go!'" (Shemot 12:29,31). The game was over.

Strangely enough, nobody paid any attention to Pharaoh. Since G-d had commanded the Jews to remain in their homes until daybreak (12:22), the Exodus did not begin until morning. This surprising fact is commented on by the Talmud, "Rabbi Abba taught, It is uncontested that the Jews were redeemed at night, as the verse states, 'Hashem, your G-d, took you out of Egypt at night' (Devarim 16:1). [It is also uncontested that] the Jews *departed* from Egypt by day, as the verse states, 'On the day after the Passover [sacrifice] the Israelites left with a high hand before the eyes of the Egyptians' (Bamidbar 33:3)" (*Berachot* 9a).

Why would G-d redeem us at night if we are not to leave before morning? What is the message here?

Everybody knows why we eat matzah on Passover. In the Haggadah we quote the verse from this week's parsha, "[The Israelites] baked the dough that they had brought out of Egypt into (unleavened) matzah cakes, since it had not risen. They had been driven out of Egypt and could not delay" (Shemot 12:39). In other words, the Jews left Egypt in a hurry and had no time to let their dough rise. So they baked matzah. Therefore, to commemorate this historical fact, we have a mitzvah to eat matzah on Passover.

If it were only that simple! Actually, we were given the mitzvah to eat matzah *before* we left Egypt (12:15). Furthermore, The Pascal lamb that was eaten in Egypt prior to the Exodus had to be eaten with matzah (12:8). Clearly, the significance of matzah does not derive solely from the fact that the Jews ate matzah after the Exodus. Matzah must have had meaning prior to the Exodus as well. Indeed, the Torah describes matzah as "bread of affliction" (Devarim 16:3) and the Haggadah quotes this description in its opening paragraph. Apparently, the Jewish slaves were fed matzah in Egypt, as it is a cheap and filling food.

It seems that matzah is a bit conflicted. Not only does matzah remind us of our freedom; it reminds us of our slavery as well. The strange duality of matzah expresses itself most vividly on the Seder night. On the one hand we eat matzah while reclining in the fashion of a free man, but yet we also eat matzah together with the *marror* (bitter herb) reliving our oppressed life as slaves.



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How effective can a symbol be when it represents polar opposites? We already have the *marror* to symbolize our suffering as slaves, couldn't we find something better than the "bread of affliction" to symbolize our freedom?

The *Sefat Emet* (Pessach 5633) makes a remarkable statement, "The truth is that matzah symbolizes both the slavery and the redemption. This is because it is incumbent upon us to praise G-d for the exile too. If not, why should we praise him for the redemption?!"

We were in Egypt for a reason. It was in the plans for a long time; G-d told Abraham that the Jews would be enslaved and afflicted. Obviously, there were lessons that G-d wanted us to internalize in a way that only the experience of slavery made possible. We learned that G-d will never forsake us, that He hears our prayers. We learned to empathize with the oppressed, to care for the downtrodden (Devarim 24:18,22). Compassion, an unassuming nature, and kindness became the hallmark of the Jew (Yevamot 79a). When we sing Hallel at the Seder we are saying that we understand that our experience in Egypt was not about suffering, it was about growth. Otherwise, why should we praise G-d for taking us out of Egypt if He was the one who put us there in the first place?

The duality of matzah teaches us not to be so shortsighted as to celebrate redemption without reflecting on what we have learned and how we have grown from our suffering. The matzah forces us to be conscious of our past slavery even as we recline in freedom, and to keep the hope for salvation alive even as we suffer through the *marror*. With the matzah the entire experience in Egypt, from slavery through redemption, is united and appreciated as the process that forged and refined the Jewish character. It was under the oppression of the Egyptian exile that the Jews evolved spiritually into a nation worthy of the Torah.

The redemption of the Jews *from* Egypt cannot be viewed independently from the experience of the Jews *in* Egypt. On a deeper level, the true redemption of the Jews actually took place within Egypt before we physically left the country. In the darkness of night, inside the slave camp of Egypt, we gained our inner redemption. Only after that was achieved and appreciated could we march out triumphantly with the rising sun.

Shabbat Shalom

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