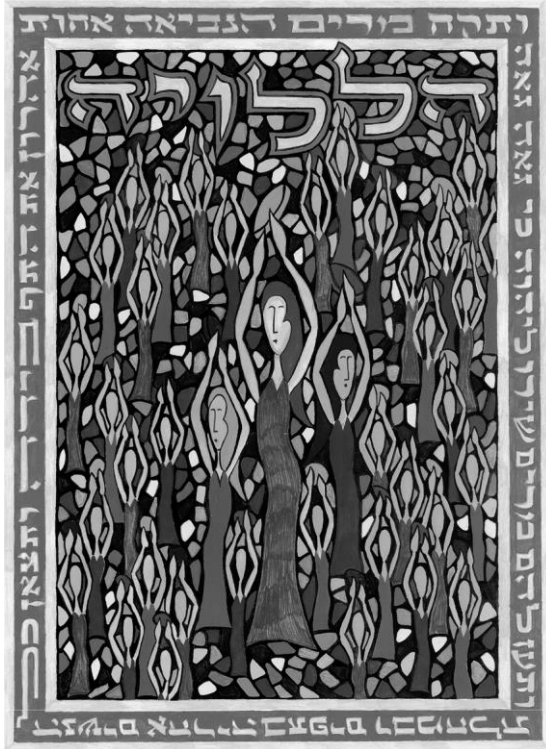


Moses in the basket and arranged for Yokheved, Moses' own mother, to be his wet nurse until he was weaned. Since babies were nursed for several years in ancient cultures, Yokheved is able to transmit core values to Moses in his formative years, planting the seeds of his identity as a man of ethics and as a Hebrew.



Copyright 2008 Rabbi Matthew L. Berkowitz, *The Lovell Haggadah*

Thirty-six women surround our Prophetess. Abbaye, a Babylonian scholar of the Talmudic period, teaches, “There are not fewer than 36 righteous individuals in the world who receive the Divine Presence” (BT *Sanhedrin* 97b and BT *Sukkot* 45b). The illumination depicts these individuals, credited with God’s daily decision to sustain the world, as the women who follow Miriam, praising God through music and dance. They are dancing for a cause, not only for their present deliverance, but also for the redemption to come. Let each of us aspire to their ideal, acting as if the world’s survival depended on our joy, leadership and righteousness.

To view this image in full color, visit www.jtsa.edu/prophetess-leader-musician

jtsa.edu/torah

To receive *Torah from JTS* by email,
visit jtsa.edu/subscribe



TORAH FROM JTS



Pesah 5780

פסח תש"ף



Matzah’s Majestic Meaning

Rabbi Judith Hauptman, E. Billi Ivry Professor
Emerita of Talmud and Rabbinic Culture, JTS

I don’t know why we ask the first of the four seder questions—“On all other nights we eat both *hametz* and matzah but on this night only matzah.” The *Ha lahma anya* paragraph that immediately precedes the questions already answers it. The opening words, “this is the bread of affliction (*lahma anya* in the Aramaic) that our ancestors ate in the land of Egypt,” suggest that the Israelite slaves in Egypt, who presumably had no time to bake bread, ate matzah. And that is why we eat matzah on Passover. So why ask the first question?

This interpretation of the first line of the *Ha lahma anya* paragraph is problematic, however. Nowhere in the book of Exodus, or anywhere else in the Torah, does it say that the slaves ate matzah. There is, in fact, no basis for such a statement. True, Deuteronomy 16:3 says that, “when you make your paschal sacrifice, do not eat *hametz* with it; seven days eat matzah, *lehem oni*, because you left Egypt in haste, so that you remember the day you left Egypt all the days of your life.” JPS translates *lehem oni* (the Hebrew of *lahma anya*) as “bread of distress.”

Admittedly, *lehem oni* is an obscure phrase. The prominent Bible scholar Adele Berlin explained to me that the word “distress” refers to the bread, not to the people who ate it. That is, this verse does not say that the slaves in Egypt ate matzah but just the opposite: that the Israelites ate matzah as they were becoming free people, right before and right after they left Egypt (see below). “Bread of distress” may mean that the bread itself was “distressed” in the sense that the dough did not rise, that it remained flat.

Matzah first appears in the Torah in connection with Lot and his unexpected guests. In addition to making them a meal, he baked matzot, which could be prepared fast (Gen. 19:3). Matzah’s first appearance in connection with Passover is at Exodus 12, which describes the sequence of events on the night of leaving Egypt. The Israelites are told to slaughter a lamb (v. 6), smear its blood on the doorposts (v. 7), and then eat the lamb’s roasted flesh, together with matzot and *merorim* (bitter herbs) (v. 8). The celebrants should be ready to depart when

eating this nighttime meal—loins girded, feet in sandals, and staff in hand (v. 11). The chapter later says (vv. 14–17) that the Exodus from Egypt should be observed in perpetuity by eating matzot for seven days, beginning with the anniversary of the Exodus, which, in our terms, is 15 Nisan. These verses make it clear that matzah symbolizes God’s redemption of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt.

But that is not all. The chapter goes on to say (v. 39) that when the Israelites left, they took with them dough that had not yet risen. Since they had not anticipated the need to depart so very fast, they had not prepared provisions for the journey. The raw dough was baked into matzah, probably by the sun, since they carried their kneading troughs on their shoulders (v. 34). This detail about the dough is intended as praise of God for the rapid way in which He got all the Israelites out of Egypt safely. At midnight, as soon as God’s tenth plague hit the Egyptians, they pressured the Israelites to leave (v. 33). And the Israelites left, in haste. These verses, therefore, give rise to a second symbolic meaning of matzah. It stands not just for redemption but for the rapidity of the redemption.

Centuries later, the Rabbis of the Mishnah also grasped matzah as bread of redemption, not of slavery. Rabban Gamliel says that to discharge one’s obligation at the seder, a person has to say three things: *Pesah* (the Passover sacrifice), matzah, and *maror*. He goes on to explain, “Why do we eat matzah—because our ancestors were redeemed from Egypt” (M. Pesahim 10:5). That is, Rabban Gamliel sees matzah in positive terms only.

When the Haggadah later incorporated his statement about matzah into the seder ritual, the language changed somewhat. As his teaching appears in the Haggadah, Rabban Gamliel says that matzah reminds us that “before the dough had time to rise, God revealed Himself to them and redeemed them.” This is a conflation of the two nuances of matzah—bread of redemption and bread of rapid redemption. This paragraph, and not *Ha lahma anya*, is the answer to the first of the four questions.

As for the opening statement of *Ha lahma anya*, I think the standard English translations are misleading. A better way to render the line is: this is the bread of distress that our ancestors ate in the land of Egypt, *on the night that they left*. The italicized words do not appear in the Haggadah but adding them is a fair interpretation.

The reason I find it important to offer this correction to the meaning of matzah is that viewing it as bread of redemption is not only closer to the plain sense of the words of the Torah but communicates a far loftier lesson. Matzah,

by its flatness (not its crispness, which is a relatively recent phenomenon), reminds us of a peak moment in our past: God’s intervention in Jewish history, the end of our enslavement, and the beginnings of our peoplehood.

When we mention the Exodus frequently in our prayers, for example with the phrase **זכר ליציאת מצרים** (*zekher leyetziat Mitzrayim*) in the Kiddush on Friday night and festivals, we are not just thanking God for past beneficence. We are also implying that, as a holy people, we will not tolerate slavery anywhere in the world today. We celebrate our own freedom by rededicating ourselves to free others who are still enslaved. This is the great moral lesson of Passover. And it is triggered by looking at the flatbread on the seder table and letting it jog our memory.

At your seder this year, you can do the following: read the *Ha lahma anya* paragraph aloud, along with its English translation, and then flip to a page much later in the Haggadah, to the statement of Rabban Gamliel about the meaning of matzah, and read it aloud also. Ask the seder guests to compare the two paragraphs. Hopefully they will notice the discrepancy between the two and begin to think about the message of matzah and the grand ethical teachings of Passover.

The publication and distribution of the *JTS Holiday Commentary* are made possible by a generous grant from Rita Dee (z”l) and Harold Hassenfeld (z”l).



Prophetess, Leader, Musician

Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, Director of Israel Programs, JTS

Joy is the theme of the hour as God’s praises are sung during the completion of Hallel. The image that bursts forth in our mind’s eye is that of Miriam the Prophetess and the women celebrating their newly found freedom on the banks of the Reed Sea. While the moment is solemn, it is also one of intense elation.

Vivid colors animate this illumination. “*Hallelujah*,” the refrain of many *Hallel* Psalms, floats boldly at the top of the design. A mosaic of blues evokes the movement of the sea. Miriam stands amidst a crowd of women, musical instruments in hand, dancing to celebrate their salvation. Scrolled around the frame is the Hebrew excerpt from the Torah reading for the seventh day of Pesah (and *Parashat Beshallah*), which records this episode (Exod. 15:20-21).

Miriam figures prominently in the story of redemption. According to a midrash (BT Sotah 12a), after her parents divorced to avoid Pharaoh’s decree, she convinced them to remarry and have more children. Miriam watched over