

*hallel* during the holiday . . . so as not to “rejoice upon the downfall of your enemy” . . .

In my opinion, the fact that this mitzvah is mentioned now (in Exod. 12) **before** the Egyptians drowned is to demonstrate the perfection of God’s mitzvot. Israel does not rejoice in the downfall of their enemies as it is stated: “Rejoice not when your enemy falls, and let not your heart be glad when he stumbles. Lest the Lord see it and it displease Him’ (Proverbs 24:17–18) . . . so the upstanding person does not rejoice when his enemy falls because this rejoicing displeases God . . . therefore concerning Passover it is only mentioned that God took the children of Israel out of Egypt; there is no celebrating the destruction of their enemies.

Both Abarbanel and the Meshekh Hokhmah suggest that God anticipated the reactions of the Israelites and consequently presented the mitzvah to eat matzah and the mitzvah to celebrate the seventh day **before** the narrative description of events.

Abarbanel suggests that the placement of the mitzvah was intended to heighten the experiential, even physical, nature of the mitzvah while the Meshekh Hokhmah suggests that the placement was intended to highlight the moral/attitudinal aspect of the mitzvah in particular and the perfection of the mitzvot in general.

Perhaps we, too, might learn from these commentaries to anticipate the needs and reactions of others by choosing our words thoughtfully.

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יום טוב אחרון של פסח תשפ"א



## Learning from God to Anticipate the Reactions of Others

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### The Mitzvot of Matzah and the Seventh Day of Passover

Why do we eat matzah on Passover? According to the instructions that God conveyed to Israel prior to the Exodus we eat matzah because we are commanded: “Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread (*matzot*)” (Exod. 12:15). However, according to Exod. 12:39, where the narrative of the events is related, we eat matzah because the Israelites, having been driven out of Egypt, were unable to linger to allow time for the dough to rise: “And they baked unleavened cakes (*matzot*) . . . because they were thrust out of Egypt and could not tarry.” If so, why does the Torah present the mitzvah (the command) before the Exodus has actually taken place? The verses seem **out of order!**

**Abarbanel** (Don Isaac Abarbanel, 1438–1507, Spain/Portugal/Italy) clearly articulates our question citing the Passover Haggadah to bolster his point:

“In the Haggadah, Rabban Gamliel explained the reason for eating matzah and refraining from *hametz* by stating ‘Why do we eat this matzah? Because their [the Israelites’] dough did not have time to rise and become leaven before God revealed Himself and redeemed them . . .’ Since God commanded the Israelites to eat matzah and refrain from *hametz* **before** they left Egypt (Exod. 12:15), how could Rabban Gamliel say the reason was because there was not sufficient time for the dough to rise before they were redeemed (Exod. 12: 39)?”

Abarbanel responds to his own question as follows:

For if in actuality this mitzvah were given to Israel after their having left Egypt, perhaps they would not have experienced the speed of the redemption and would not have comprehended the reason for the mitzvah and its true [essence]. Therefore, God cleverly commanded this mitzvah to them [while they were still in Egypt] before they left; and since it was the first mitzvah they were commanded, they were especially zealous concerning it and kneaded their dough thinking they would have time to bake the matzot in Egypt as they had been commanded. However, before the baking (took place), Pharaoh and his servants came to say “rise up and go out from among my people” (Exod. 12:31). So they left in great haste.

. . . And the children of Israel and their wives were extremely concerned lest the dough become leaven and they would [thereby] sin to God concerning the first mitzvah He had commanded them. So when they arrived in . . . another location suitable for baking their dough, they examined it and found they were wafers of matzah and had not become *hametz*. And they thus realized and understood that they had left in such great haste and God had worked miraculously for them. And this recognition came to them [only] because they were commanded concerning the guarding of the *matzot* **before** they had left . . .

Abarbanel’s understanding of the purpose of the mitzvah, then, is, in essence, experiential or educational; God wanted the mitzvah of matzah to have the maximum impact upon the psyche of the Israelites. Because of God’s understanding of human nature, God **anticipated** the response of the Israelites to their unexpectedly speedy departure. Knowing that the Israelites would be especially punctilious in their observance of the very first mitzvah commanded them, God intentionally commanded them to bake matzah before the fact. This

heightened their awareness of the extraordinary nature of the redemption, epitomized by the discovery that the dough they took with them had miraculously not risen even after a journey of a few days. Thus, this experience became etched in their memories and in their collective consciousness, ensuring that they would transmit this experience to generations to come. When the Haggadah is read today, the experiential nature of the mitzvot is indeed highlighted: “In every generation one must look upon himself as if he personally had gone out of Egypt”

According to Abarbanel, God was engaging in “feedforward” to use a concept developed by I. A. Richards (1893–1979, England), one of the literary influences of my teacher, Prof. Nechama Leibowitz. “Feedforward” is the concept of anticipating the effect of one’s words by acting as one’s own critic. Existing in all forms of communication, feedforward acts as a pretest that any writer/speaker can use to anticipate the impact of their words on their audience. According to Richards, feedforward allows one to then engage with their text/audience to make necessary changes to create a better effect ([Wikipedia, “I. A. Richards”](#)).

Like Abarbanel, the Mesekh Hokhmah (R. Meir Simha of Dvinsk, 1843–1926) employs the concept of “feedforward”—this time when commenting on verses related to the seventh day of Passover and dealing with a similar issue of verses seeming **out of order**.

The Mesekh Hokhmah notes that the Egyptians drowned on the seventh day of Passover. Why then, he asks, were the Israelites commanded to celebrate the seventh day **before** they left Egypt (Exod. 12) and **before** the Egyptians were drowned (Exod. 14)? He responds that,

[I]f God had commanded that that we celebrate the seventh day after the fact [of the drowning], one might have thought that God had commanded us to celebrate the downfall of the wicked. . . therefore the Israelites were commanded while they were still in Egypt to celebrate the seventh day **before** the Egyptians had drowned in the sea . . . and that is why the word “joy” is not mentioned concerning Passover, and one does not recite the entire