

Matzah: Symbol of Slavery or Freedom?

There are two central texts in the haggadah that mention matzah. The first is “ha lachma anya” which states “This is the bread of affliction that our fathers ate in the land of Egypt. Whoever is hungry, let them come and eat.” The second is when Rabban Gamliel says “This Matzah that we eat for what reason? Because the dough of our ancestors did not have time to become leavened”.

So we have two distinct symbolisms for matzah. On the one hand it’s the bread of slavery, representing servitude and poverty, and on the other hand it represents freedom and the haste with which the Children of Israel had to act at the time of their liberation. This seeming contradiction is also mirrored when the Torah says “You shall not eat anything leavened with it; for seven days thereafter you shall eat unleavened bread, bread of affliction; for you departed from the land of Egypt hurriedly; so that you may remember the day of your departure from the land of Egypt as long as you live.” (Devarim 16:3). We’re left unsure of what we’re meant to be feeling. When we eat the matzah, are we meant to be thinking about slavery or freedom?

One way of accounting for this discrepancy is the claim that this is the point of the seder. We, as Jews in the 21st century, undergo the experience of transition from slavery to freedom. This is expressed by the Ritba (Rabbi Yom Tov ben Avraham Ishbili, 125-1330) who stresses that “every single individual must see and look at themselves as though they had been a slave in Egypt and as though they went forth to freedom.” We are commanded to experience the same emotions as the slaves who left Egypt for freedom and that’s what we do when our perception of matzah shifts from being the bread of slavery to the bread of freedom.

Alternatively, maybe it’s not about the journey. Maybe the matzah doesn’t undergo a transition from slavery to freedom like we do but in fact remains unchanged throughout. It is simultaneously a symbol of slavery and freedom. In modern times we see this often. Technology can be liberating, it can give us access to people on the other side of the world and information like never before. And at the same time we can be enslaved to our phones, unable to function without them. The amount of choice we have at the moment can make us feel free to do whatever we want and simultaneously feel restricted and unable to select an outcome. We’ve all been in the situation where we can’t decide where to go for dinner because there’s too many options available. This is what matzah can symbolise. Like many things in life, it can be *both* freedom and slavery and what’s important is for us to recognise when things can have both these aspects and to find ways in which they can bring meaning into our lives. From the time of the pesach story until now, Jews have been charged with facing the complex contradictions in life and investigating them in a productive and serious way. The process of facing the difficulties head on with honesty strengthens us as a community and is at the heart of what Judaism is.