

Pesach 5776

Festival of sub-standard bread

One of many parallels between Pesach and Succot is that they both take a very ordinary, everyday thing – a piece of bread, a garden hut – and elevate it into the emblem of the festival. And, in fact, the version of the “everyday” thing they take as their emblem is, in both cases, sub-standard – matzah is bread that hasn’t had time to rise, a succah is a shelter whose roof can’t keep the rain out. Why would the Torah place a common or garden object – and an imperfect one at that – at the forefront of its great festivals?

In the case of the succah, this question is perhaps hinted at in the famous rabbinic debate as to whether the festival is about “succot mamash” – actual desert structures – or “ananei kavod” – clouds of glory. The “ananei kavod” view is saying that the emblem of the festival is not really faulty temporary structures, but the supernatural protection given by G-d to His people in the desert. The “succot mamash” view is saying, no, there is something inherently significant about faulty temporary structures.

Is there a parallel debate about matzah? There is probably no literal parallel: everyone seems to agree that the matzah we are commemorating is the same (more or less) as the matzah we are eating. But, as is well known, there are two views of what matzah represents running through the Haggadah. The Haggada starts out, at “Ha lahma anya”, with the view that matzah is “lehem oni”, the poor man’s bread, the bread of servitude. This perhaps parallels the “succot mamash” view of things: the Torah has chosen imperfect bread as the emblem of Pesach, because that is the kind of bread our ancestors ate as slaves. But on this view, we are driven to saying the emblem of Pesach is an emblem of slavery – which seems not quite right, as Pesach is the festival of our freedom.

Later in the Haggadah, Rabban Gamliel addresses the question of what matzah symbolises head-on, when he includes it as one of the three must-have items to be explained at the Seder. Here, he says that the significance of matzah is that it shows how quickly G-d made the redemption happen. It happened, not so much in the twinkling of an eye, but in the leavening of bread. This seems more in keeping with the “ananei kavod” view of things – the significance of matzah lies not so much in the sub-standard bread as such – but rather in what it reflects about what G-d did at the time of the festival for the redemption of our ancestors.

Is there a “matzah mamash” (so to speak) point of view – one that finds something inherently significant in an imperfect piece of bread that at the same time explains its elevation as the emblem of “hag haherut” (the festival of freedom)? The clue may lie in the other two symbols which Rabban Gamliel says are required to fulfil the key obligation of Seder night – to tell the exodus story. The first-mentioned symbol, “Pesach” (as in the paschal lamb), clearly alludes to the role G-d plays in the exodus story, passing over the houses of our enslaved ancestors when He struck down the first-born of the oppressor Egyptians. Meanwhile, the third-mentioned symbol, “Marror” clearly alludes to the role of *the Egyptians* in the story, as the ones who inflicted bondage on our ancestors. By process of elimination, this suggests that the second-mentioned symbol, “Matzah”, must be telling us something important about the role of our Israelite ancestors.

What this is may be found in the proof-text cited by Rabban Gamliel for the significance of matzah: *“They baked the dough that they took out of Egypt into matzah cakes, for they could not be leavened, for they were driven from Egypt for they could not delay, nor had they made provisions for themselves.”* (Exodus 12,39)

The role played by our Israelite ancestors at the moment of “geulah” (liberation) was not particularly grand: they were in a rush; they were unprepared; the “geulah”, which had been foretold by Avraham Avinu centuries before, and previewed by Moshe through signs and wonders in the preceding weeks and months, had arrived; but it seems our ancestors had not made the packed lunches (so to speak). The best that can be said is that they “made do”. They baked the dough they had. Such were the circumstances in which the first matzah was baked.

In normal life, being in a rush, being unprepared, and having to “make do,” are not heroic qualities. But the exodus, which we commemorate at Pesach, clearly wasn’t “normal life”. It was, as they say in business parlance, “disruptive”. The verses immediately following the one quoted above, speak of the centuries-long spell of Bnei Yisrael in Egypt, in terms of “hamoshav ... asher yashvu”. These words indicate sitting and settlement. But when it ended, in the following verse, it was “be-etzem hayom hazeh” - it was sudden (and decades in advance of the foretold date). Passive and minor as their role in the liberation was, our Israelite ancestors were open to it happening to them, willing to change, and willing to “make do”. In the face of extreme disruption, these were heroic qualities. And so an imperfect piece of bread becomes the emblem of Hag Hamatzot.