



## JUST IN TIME

*Harav Y. Reuven Rubin Shlita*

"Oh, Rabbi, you can't be serious."

"I am," was my answer.

"But Rabbi, we can get matzo for a pound twenty a box. Why are you paying more than ten times that price?" This conversation was an annual occurrence whenever I gave a shiur to not yet torah observant students about the essence of Passover. It didn't end with these howls of dismay either. I ended up going into all the nitty gritty of how hand shemura matzo is produced and the need for extreme diligence on the part of all concerned.

To that audience, anything more exotic than a neatly packaged box of square matzo is from some prehistoric era. "Who makes anything by hand anymore?" they wanted to know. As I explained that many people have the minhag to eat only these ancient relics, clan Rubin included, I began to reevaluate certain aspects of this cherished custom.

I well remember the times I went to the matzo bakery to bake matzos for my kehilla in New York. Calling my efforts "baking" is a bit over-ambitious. I was really there to supervise, or, perhaps better said, share in the ongoing scrupulous baking done by true professionals. They honoured me with the making of the first maya (dough), giving it over to the resident shomer who then sprang into action. 'Klapping' of rolling pins were then heard as everyone pushed themselves to work as quickly as possible. The room became a vortex of activity, of constant hand scrubbing, of repeated shouts of "matzo in oiven arein," of 'reidellers' running their massive appliances over and over again, of paper being ripped — all pervaded by the fragrant smell of matzos baking in the oven. It was impossible not to be drawn into the frenzied world of "L'shem matzos mitzva!" No matter how placid a person usually was,

בס"ד



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he always worked up a sweat “at the matzos.”

During all this, I would be walking around, trying to keep out of the real workers paths, while looking at the most vital ingredient of them all: my watch. As the second hand made its sweep around the dial, everyone would be aware that time was of the essence.

I was once visiting a noted Rav who was in fact the kashrus supervisor for much of the flour used for the shemura matzo. At the phone’s ring, the Rav interrupted our discussion to take the call. I heard one-half of a strange conversation, something to do with crop moisture and a farm in America’s heartlands. The Rav’s ended the conversation by saying, “I’ll be ready to go in an hour.” After replacing the receiver, he asked me if I could take him to the airport. “Of course,” I said, and before I could catch my breath, he was running upstairs to grab an already packed suitcase, tallis and tefillin and a Gemara. “Nu,” he panted when he returned. I was still in a daze.

Within minutes, we were on our way. The Rav, an elderly scholar, was hardly winded by all the rushing. “You see,” he explained patiently, “this has been a wet year. We still haven’t found wheat dry enough to be used for shemura matzo. That call came from one of our field workers who thinks he found a suitable crop, and I have to check it immediately. If all goes well, we will cut it today before any rainfall.”

Wow! Who would have thought this is what goes on? I mean, flour is flour — or is it?

But it’s more than flour we’re talking about; it’s about Time.

Rabbi Gamliel tells us in the hagada that there are three aspects of Pesach that must be understood at the seder. If not, “one has not fulfilled one’s duty.” These three are Pesach, matzo and maror. In what way is matzo the “bread of freedom”? The most obvious thing about it is that it is unleavened. The hagada reminds us of this when it tells us that the dough of our ancestors had no time to rise. It is the concept of time that makes this bread special. Freedom required a mastering over the clock.

If we add yeast to the flour-and-water mixture, it becomes chametz, fermented. Fermentation connotes turbulence and agitation. The disorder implied is reflected in the word chametz as well. Left undisturbed in an empty room, a small bit of yeast will grow into a huge mass. So too, if we allow our normal instincts to ferment unchecked, they will grow into jealousy, lust, anger and who knows what else. Idleness — leaving our time empty of purpose — makes spiritual chametz mushroom. Just as we must constantly knead the matzo dough to prevent the formation of chametz, we must fill our time with positive Torah activity. This is what will prevent our souls from fermenting into chaos.

This holds true for mankind as well. The same elements that can create evil can, if controlled by positive activity, lead to real freedom. The vibrant joy of the seder starts with cutting of the wheat in its field months earlier.

Yes, I know my matzo bill will probably be more than the monthly food budget of many people in the world, but think for a minute how much effort went into those unique matzos and how many

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times sincere Yidden cried out, “Leshem matzos mitzva!” over them. Matzos should not be thought of as a consumer item that, given a little modern technology, can be manufactured more economically. They bespeak the sanctification of Time in a material world.

I’ve heard from Yidden who have survived the Holocaust as to how they went to extremes to obtain at least a semblance of matzo for the seder during those dark times. They themselves were the korban Pesach, the sacrifice. As for maror, the bitter herbs, they had plenty. But matzo? How could they become masters over time given their status as slaves?

This was the secret of their survival. The Nazis wanted to break their spirit, but a spirit that does not allow for fermentation can’t be destroyed. So, they thought about matzo, they schemed about matzo, and sometimes, by some special siyatta dishmaya, they got something that looked like matzo. No matter whether they succeeded or not. Their minds, their hearts would not allow chametz to take over their beings.

One survivor shared with me his experiences on the last Pesach in the Warsaw ghetto. He was a youngster, and all around him was disaster — bombs, fires, total destruction. On the seder night, he sat huddled in a bunker with his father. They had no food, but they went through the hagada. The young boy asked the four questions, after which he turned to his father and said, “Tatty, I have yet two more questions to ask: Will I be alive next year to ask you the four questions, and will you be alive to answer them?”

The father looked into his son’s eyes, tears rolling down his gaunt face. “Sweet neshama, I don’t know if I’ll be alive to hear your four questions next year, and to tell you the truth, I don’t know if you’ll be alive to ask them. But one thing I can promise you: no matter what, there will always be Yiddishe kinder somewhere who will be able to ask those questions, and there will always be Yiddishe Tattys who will be there to answer them.”

By guarding our time carefully and using it as Hashem would wish us to, we link ourselves to the past, to our holy forefathers, and to the future, when Moshiach will bring the final redemption.