

Another understanding of why we eat Matzah

We read that after *Benei Yisrael* journeyed from Egypt at the time of the Exodus, “they baked the dough which they had brought from Egypt as unleavened cakes, rather than leaven, because they were rushed from Egypt and could not delay...” ([Shemot 12:39](#)). The *Haggadah* famously explains this verse to mean that “the dough of our forefathers did not have a chance to ferment before the King of kings appeared to them and redeemed them.” In other words, *Benei Yisrael* baked *matza* because the dough did not have a chance to rise before the redemption, as they were rushed out of Egypt. **However, this interpretation seems untenable, as the Torah here speaks of *Benei Yisrael* baking the *matzot* after leaving Egypt, when, seemingly, they were no longer under any sort of pressure.** Why, then, were they forced to bake *matzot*? Why did they not wait for the dough to rise, so they could prepare proper bread?

A novel explanation of this verse, and of the aforementioned passage from the *Haggadah*, is offered by Seforno. He boldly asserts that when the *Haggadah* speaks of the moment when “the King of kings appeared to them and redeemed them,” it refers not to the plague of the firstborn, which prompted the Egyptians to drive *Benei Yisrael* from their country, but to a later event. The Torah tells that *Benei Yisrael*’s first stop after leaving Egypt was a place called Sukkot: “The Israelites journeyed from Ramses to Sukkot” (12:37). Two verses later, the Torah tells of *Benei Yisrael* baking their dough, and it appears that this took place in Sukkot, where they encamped and thus for the first time had an opportunity to prepare food. Seforno contends that it was in Sukkot when God, in the *Haggadah*’s words, “appeared to them and redeemed them.” Later in Sefer [Shemot \(13:20-21\)](#), the Torah tells of *Benei Yisrael*’s departure from Sukkot, describing how they were led by God Himself, who had a pillar of cloud guide the nation by day and a pillar of fire by night. These miraculous phenomena, which constituted a sort of revelation of God, began at Sukkot. Seforno thus points to this event as the “revelation” spoke of by the *Haggadah*. He explains that, as *Chazal* relate in the *Mekhilta* (cited

by Rashi to 12:37), *Benei Yisrael* miraculously journeyed from Egypt to Sukkot in a very brief period of time, such that the dough still hadn't risen by their arrival in Sukkot. Then, at Sukkot, God revealed Himself in the form of a pillar of cloud, and *Benei Yisrael* were compelled at that moment to bake their dough. As the dough had not yet risen, they baked *matzot*. (This approach was also taken by Abarbanel, in his *Zevach Pesach* commentary to the *Haggadah*.)

Seforno does not explain why God's "revelation" at Sukkot necessitated that the people immediately bake rather than wait for the dough to rise. We might speculate that the appearance of the cloud signified to the people that they needed to travel. The Torah tells in Sefer [Bamidbar \(9:15-23\)](#) that the rise of the cloud announced to *Benei Yisrael* that they needed to journey, and it is thus likely that when the cloud appeared for the first time, in Sukkot, it was understood as making this announcement. Seeing that it was time to leave, the people quickly baked their dough – despite its having not yet risen – so they would have food for the journey ahead.

The flaw in Seforno's creative reading of this verse is that it does not account for the emphasis on the nation's having been rushed out of Egypt. This factor resulted in the dough's being unleavened, but it is not the reason why the people baked the dough in Sukkot as *matzot*. The need to bake without delay was due to an entirely different factor – God's unexpected revelation in Sukkot – which the verse does not even mention. The verse instead stresses the point that the people were rushed out of Egypt, which does not explain the need to bake the dough later in its unleavened form. Hence, this interpretation seems somewhat difficult to accept.