

Why we eat Matzah

The *Haggadah* famously teaches that the *mitzva* of eating *matza* on Pesach commemorates the fact that “the dough of our forefathers did not have a chance to ferment before the King of kings appeared to them and redeemed them.” Indeed, the Torah tells in Parashat Bo (12:33-34) that the Egyptians pressured *Benei Yisrael* to leave quickly, and thus *Benei Yisrael* were forced to carry their unfermented dough with them as they left Egypt. It seems that the people wanted to wait for the dough to rise so they could bake proper bread in preparation for their journey, but they were rushed out of Egypt before this could happen. Therefore, they left with dough that had not yet risen.

Interestingly, however, the *Haggadah* cites a different verse as the source of this reason for eating *matza*. Several verses later (12:37-39), we read that *Benei Yisrael* left Egypt, journeying from the city of Raamses – where they had apparently assembled for their departure – towards Sukkot. At that time, the Torah relates, “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...” This verse tells *Benei Yisrael* baked the dough before it had an opportunity to rise, thus resulting in what we call *matza*, as opposed to proper bread. The earlier verse told us that *Benei Yisrael* were forced to leave Egypt before their dough had a chance to rise and be baked; this verse tells us that as they left, they baked it in its unleavened form. The *Haggadah* cites the latter verse as its source, seemingly because it maintained that the *mitzva* of *matza* commemorates not the unleavened condition of the dough brought out of Egypt, but rather the final product that the people ate after their departure when they baked their dough before it rose.

However, this later verse itself requires explanation. It is understandable that the people were forced to leave Egypt before the dough had an opportunity to ferment, such that bread could not be baked at that time. But why were they compelled to later bake this dough as *matza*? It is clear from the text that the dough was baked after the people’s departure from Egypt – “They baked the dough **which they had brought from Egypt.**” At that point, quite

obviously, the Egyptians were not rushing them. Why, then, did the people bake the dough as *matza*, rather than wait and allow it to rise so they could bake proper bread?

This question led the Ramban to an entirely different reading of the verse. He explained that the reason why *Benei Yisrael* baked and ate *matzot* had nothing at all to do with their having been hastily driven from Egypt. Already before the night of the Exodus, *Benei Yisrael* were given the command to refrain from *chametz* on Pesach ([Shemot 12:15](#)). Different views exist as to whether this prohibition applied already in the year of the Exodus, and, if so, for how long. (See [Pesachim 96a](#); Rav Menachem Kasher, in *Haggadah Sheleima*, pp. 195-201, cites five different opinions on this subject.) The Ramban writes explicitly that *Benei Yisrael* were forbidden from eating *chametz* on the day of the Exodus, and it is for this reason that they baked their dough before it rose. When the Torah attributes the baking of *matzot* to the fact that they were hastily chased from Egypt, the Ramban explains, it gives the reason why they needed to bake while journeying. The haste from Egypt is not what forced them to bake *matza* instead of bread, but what forced them to bake during travel, as they did not have time to prepare anything before they left.

The *Haggadah*, however, clearly did not follow this interpretation. As mentioned, the *Haggadah* cites this verse as the source for its comment that we eat *matza* on Pesach to recall that “the dough of our forefathers did not have a chance to ferment before the King of kings appeared to them and redeemed them.” For the authors of the *Haggadah*, this verse, which tells of *Benei Yisrael* baking *matzot* after departing Egypt, indicates that *matzot* were prepared because the people’s dough did not have a chance to rise. This seems very difficult to understand, for, as noted, the *matzot* were baked after *Benei Yisrael’s* departure from Egypt, when they were no longer being rushed.