

Leaven, Honey and the Altar of God

By Rav Chanoch Waxman

I

After opening with the laws concerning the various types of burnt offerings (olah), SeferVayikra turns its attention to the mundane meal offering:

And when a person offers a meal offering (mincha), his offering shall be of fine flour; he shall pour oil upon it, lay frankincense upon it, and he shall bring it to... the priests. (2:1-2)

Sometimes consisting of raw flour and oil, sometimes baked, sometimes pan-fried and sometimes deep fried (2:1-8), the mincha constitutes a way for a person of lesser means to offer something to God (2:1). Even he who cannot afford cattle, sheep or birds (see 1:2-17) can approach the sanctuary, have a portion of his offering burnt on the altar and have the remainder consumed by the priests as something "most holy," kodesh kodashim (2:2-3, 8-10).

The Torah closes the laws pertaining to the four standard types of mincha offerings (2:1-13) with a warning:

Every meal offering that you offer to the Lord, do not make it leavened (chametz): for no leaven (se'or) nor honey (devash) may be turned into smoke as an offering by fire to the Lord. You may bring them to the Lord as an offering of first products (korban reishit), but they shall not be offered up on the altar for a sweet savor. (2:11-12)

Given the flow of the text until this point, the prohibition of leaven and fruit-based sweets (see Rashi and Ibn Ezra, 2:11) seems rather striking. Until this point, and indeed throughout the remainder of Parashat Vayikra, the Torah details the appropriate objects and methods for the various types of korbanot. No other prohibitions are mentioned.

This problem of textual discontinuity possesses a logical and legal dimension as well. Quite simply, one cannot enter the sanctuary and place anything one pleases on the altar. SeferVayikra does not just mandate the bringing of certain objects as offerings, but indeed permits those very objects as offerings. Here is Abarbanel's formulation of the problem:

Why was it necessary to state that se'or and devash cannot be offered? For it is known that it is not permitted to offer anything other than that which God has commanded. For example... regarding birds it was commanded to bring from pigeons and doves, and [consequently it was] wholly unnecessary to prohibit offerings of chickens and

ducks. If so... why was it necessary to explicitly prohibit se'or and devash? ([Vayikra 1, Question Twelve](#))

Leaven and honey should be no different than chickens and ducks. Just as the Torah doesn't bother to prohibit the offering of chickens and ducks, so too, the Torah should not bother to prohibit the offering of leaven and honey on the altar.

All of this leads us to the classic and more philosophical formulation of the problem. In general, Jewish exegetes have questioned not so much the textual exceptionality of the prohibition or its logical-legal necessity, but rather its very reason for being. Why does the Torah need to prohibit the bringing of leaven and honey as an offering? What is the inner meaning and philosophical rationale of the prohibition?

II

In *The Guide of the Perplexed*, Rambam suggests that the offering of leaven and honey to the gods constituted part and parcel of pagan cultic practices (III:43). According to Rambam, the Torah prohibited the offering of leaven and honey as part of a programmatic effort to distinguish between idol worship and the worship of God. If so, it is precisely because the offering of leaven and honey constitute recognized and consequently "natural" practices that the Torah must explicitly prohibit their offering. If a mincha "normally" involves leaven and sweets, the Torah must dedicate space to defining the parameters of the unique and different mincha appropriate for monotheistic worship.

At first glance, Rambam's approach may be attractive. After all, he resolves the problem of the textual uniqueness of the prohibition and provides a theory that "explains" the prohibition. However, on closer analysis, Rambam's theory provides very little in the way of satisfying explanation. By assuming that the prohibition constitutes no more than a response to contingent circumstances, to a particular historical moment and practice, Rambam's explanation empties the prohibition of religious significance and meaning. It is no more than a response to dead and buried customs.

Moreover, and more importantly, Rambam's "historical" explanation fails to deal with all of the text. Although not emphasized until this point, the prohibition of se'or and devash possesses a flip-side, a partner of positive commands.

In first formulating the prohibition of leaven-se'or, the Torah utilizes the term "chametz." The mincha cannot be "made chametz" (2:11). Shortly beforehand, the Torah repeatedly emphasized the term "matza," the physical and conceptual opposite of "chametz." The various kinds of baked and cooked meal offerings must be made as matza (2:4-5). Similarly, later on in Parashat Tzav, in elaborating upon the procedure of the mincha and the consumption of a flour and oil meal offering by the priests, the Torah focuses upon matza and chametz:

And the remainder of it shall be eaten by Aharon and his sons; it shall be eaten as matza (unleavened cakes)... It shall not be baked chametz (with leaven)... (6:9-10)

The Torah not only prohibits leaven - it seems to mandate matza.

Furthermore, the Torah mandates a particular occasion when leaven and honey constitute the appropriate substances. Following on the heels of the first prohibition of se'or and devash, the Torah states the following:

You may bring them to the Lord as an offering of first products (korban reishit)... (2:12)

While leaven and honey are prohibited on the altar, they are permitted and even mandated as part of the mysterious and never again mentioned "korban reishit."

All of this should make us realize the inadequacy of Rambam's "historical" explanation. We need to explain not just the prohibiting of leaven and honey on the altar, but also the mandating of matza as appropriate for the mincha procedure. We need to explain not just the unsuitability of leaven and honey for the altar, but also their appropriateness for "korban reishit." Rambam's theory of pagan practices seems to fail these tasks.

III

Shifting from a "historical" to a "symbolic-literary" approach may help us resolve some of the problems raised above. According to this latter way of thinking, puzzling out the symbolic meanings of "matza," "chametz," "devash" and "korban reishit" in the Bible constitutes the key to resolving the story of the meal offering. With this in mind, let us turn our attention back to Sefer Shemot, and the entrance of "matza" and "chametz" into the collective consciousness of the Children of Israel.

After reporting God's command to place the blood of the paschal sacrifice upon the doorways of the Children of Israel, the Torah moves on to the proper procedure for consuming the sacrifice:

They shall eat the meat that night... with unleavened bread (matzot) and with bitter herbs (merorim)... (12:8)

As Rashi points out (12:8), the language of the command to consume bitter herbs harks back to one of the Torah's original descriptions of the Children of Israel's suffering at the hands of the Egyptians. Back in [Shemot 1:14](#), the Torah stated that the Egyptians "made their lives bitter (vayemararu et chayeihem)." In other words, the consumption of bitter herbs constitutes a reminder of the bitter suffering endured by the Children of Israel at the hands of the Egyptians.

So too, the consumption of unleavened bread. In phrasing the prohibition of chametz and the requirement to eat matza, [Devarim 16:3](#) refers to matza as "lechem oni," the bread of affliction. This means more than the fact that the actual object of matza is low, humble and afflicted. The stem ayin-nun-heh, meaning affliction, constitutes one of the key descriptive

terms utilized in the first chapter of Shemot to describe the bondage in Egypt (see [Shemot 1:12](#)). Moreover, it is the exact term used by God in the Covenant of the Pieces to inform Avraham of the slavery and suffering of his descendants in a foreign land ([Bereishit 15:13](#)). In other words, at this point, matza symbolizes the lowliness and affliction of the slave (see Rashi and Ibn Ezra, [Devarim 16:3](#)). As preparation for redemption, the Children of Israel are required to be fully conscious of the state from which they are being redeemed. Matza constitutes one of the tools for cultivating this slavery-awareness.

As we move along in the text of Shemot, the symbol of matza undergoes a slow metamorphosis. Shortly after being told to eat matza along with the paschal sacrifice, the Children of Israel are told the following:

And thus shall you eat: with your loins girded, your shoes on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat in haste... (12:11)

The moment of redemption may arrive at any time. Sometime that night, God will redeem the Children of Israel (see 12:12). They must be ready and therefore must eat quickly. In other words, the first consumption of matza constitutes not just a reminder of slavery, but an act of preparation for redemption, a transition in the national psychology and historical status of the Children of Israel. As such, the first consumption of matza also initiates a change in the symbolic meaning of matza. It constitutes not just a symbol of slavery, but also a symbol of preparation for redemption.

In fact, matza symbolizes even more. Immediately after telling Moshe to inform the Children of Israel regarding the procedure of the paschal sacrifice, the upcoming smiting of the Egyptian firstborn, and the sparing of the Children of Israel and their redemption (12:3-13), God commands a commemorative holiday (12:14-20). The holiday involves eating matza for seven days (12:15, 18, 20). Around the middle of this command section we find the following verse:

And you shall guard (u-shemartem) the unleavened bread, for on this day I brought your hosts out of the land of Egypt... (12:17)

The Children of Israel of Israel are commanded to "guard" their matza, ostensibly to prevent it from rising and becoming chametz (Rashi, Ibn Ezra, 12:17). However, this is not the only place the stem sh-m-r, meaning guard or watch, appears in the story of the exodus. Later on, in the closing verse narrating the actual exiting from Egypt, the Torah refers to the night of the exodus as "a night of watchfulness (shimurim) of the Lord in bringing them out from the land of Egypt" (12:42). Just as God guarded and watched over the Children of Israel, protecting them from the destroyer and the death of the firstborn (12:12-13, 23), so too the Children of Israel guard and watch over their matza. In other words, the watchfulness required for the holiday of unleavened bread commemorates the God's protection and His watching over their homes during the crucial moments of redemption. Matza symbolizes more than just slavery awareness and redemption preparation. It also symbolizes the moment of redemption.

This brings us to most well-known reference to matza in Chapter Twelve. Upon the outbreak of the plague of the

firstborn, Pharaoh and the Egyptians, fearing the death of all of Egypt, hurriedly send away the Children of Israel. The people picked up their dough "before it could rise" (12:34), quickly "borrowed" some gold, silver and other finery from the Egyptians, and set off out of Egypt, journeying from Ramses to Sukkot (12:35-38). At this point, the Torah reports the following:

And they baked the dough they brought out of Egypt into unleavened cakes, for it was not leavened, for they were driven out of Egypt and they could not delay, nor had they prepared provisions... (12:39)

Matza is the food of the post-redemption journey, eaten after leaving Egypt.

To put all of this together, matza symbolizes the various steps of the redemption from Egypt. Chapter Twelve adds layer upon layer to the symbolism of matza, thereby creating a complex symbol that spans the various stages of the redemptive process. From its beginnings as a symbol of slavery, matza accompanies the Children of Israel throughout each moment of their leaving Egypt and slowly transforms into a symbol of the moment of redemption and the journey out of Egypt.

IV

While Chapter Twelve provides a rich and developed symbolism for matza, such cannot be said for chametz. Leaven just doesn't play a central role in the storyline. At most, we can deduce that leaven constitutes the physical and legal opposite of matza. There was no time for the dough to rise before the journey began, and leaven is strictly prohibited during the commemorative holiday (12:34, 39 & 12:15, 19-20). But physical and legal facts do not necessarily impart conceptual content. While logically chametz should somehow symbolize the opposite of matza, Chapter Twelve leaves us in the dark as to what might be the symbolic opposite of a redemptive process spanning slavery to journey.

This brings us back to the mysterious "korban reishit" mentioned in the mincha narrative ([Vayikra 2:12](#)), which is the appropriate occasion to bring an offering of chametz. While the Torah does not explicate what precisely constitutes a "korban reishit," most commentaries correlate it with the one time the Torah explicitly demands an offering of chametz, namely, the "minchachadasha" (see Rashi and Ibn [Ezra, 2:12](#)).

Chapter Twenty-three of Vayikra details various offerings and holidays associated with the grain harvest cycle. At Pesach time, the Children of Israel are required to bring the "omer" offering, comprised of the first reapings of the grain harvest (23:9-11). This act of thanksgiving commences the beginning of the grain harvest and permits consumption of the new harvest's grain (23:14). After counting seven full weeks, the Children of Israel must bring a "minchachadasha," a new grain offering (23:16). The Torah commands:

From your homes you shall bring two loaves of bread to be a waved offering; each shall be made of two-tenths of a measure of choice flour baked after leavening (chametzte'afena); they are first fruits (bikkurim) to the Lord. (23:17)

The "breads of first fruits" (lechem ha-bikkurim) are waved before God, sacrifices are brought and the day is sanctified as a holiday (23:19-21).

This, of course, is the holiday known as Shavuot, a name found only in [Devarim 16:9-12](#) and literally meaning "weeks." According to Devarim, from the time the "sickle falls upon the grain" one counts seven "weeks" (16:9). At this time one celebrates the holiday of "weeks" (shavuot) in "accord with all the Lord your God has blessed you" (16:10).

Either way, whether we think of it as the festival of "mincha chadasha," the festival of the two breads, or the festival of weeks, Shavuot constitutes a thanksgiving festival celebrating God's bounty.

This brings us back to chametz. The leavening, rising and fullness of the breads symbolizes the fullness of the harvest and God's blessing. The richness of the bread symbolizes the richness of the land and homes that God has granted the Children of Israel (see 23:9, 17).

All of this should help explain how "chametz" comprises the conceptual opposite of matza. Whereas unleavened bread symbolizes the redemption process and the beginnings of the Israelites' journey, leavened bread symbolizes arrival, the land and the end of the journey. This literary symbolism dovetails nicely with the physical characteristics of matza and chametz. Where as matza is not yet risen, not yet full and represents but beginnings, chametz has already risen, has already become full and represents ends.

Factoring in devash, our outstanding term, should lend further credence to the parallel between journey-land and Pesach-Shavuot. As mentioned previously, the term devash does not refer to bee honey in the Bible. Rather, it refers to sweet fruits and fruit products, most probably made from dates (see Rashi and Ibn [Ezra, 2:11](#)). This is best proven by [Devarim 26:1-11](#), colloquially known as "parashat bikkurim," the procedure for offering first fruits.

The procedure breaks down as follows. Upon coming to the land granted by God, one gathers the "reishit," the first "of the fruit of the earth... of the land that the Lord your God has given you" (26:2). Here we have another "korban reishit" celebrating the bounty of the land. After the individual's journey to the sanctuary, arrival in front of the priest and profession that he has arrived in the land promised to the forefathers (26:2-3), the priest places the fruits before the altar (26:4). In the final stage of the procedure, the pilgrim recounts the story of the bondage in Egypt and God's redemption (26:5-8), and concludes:

And He brought us to this place, and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. And now, behold, I have brought the first fruits of the land, which You Lord have given me... (26:9-10)

He then bows before God in thanksgiving (26:10).

The point should be clear. Like leaven, honey finds its place in an offering of first fruits. Like se'or, devash symbolizes the goodness of the land given by God. Like chametz, the sweet

fruit stuff constitutes the completion of the story of the exodus, the arrival at the end of the national journey of redemption.

In sum, to put it in Jewish philosophical terminology, while matza and Pesach symbolize process and potentiality, devash, chametz and Shavuot symbolize realization and actuality. Alternatively, in the language of modern existentialism, while matza is about becoming, se'or and devash are about being.

V

To close the circle, let us return to the meal offering and the problems raised earlier: the requirement to bake the mincha as matza and the prohibition of offering se'or and devash upon the altar. Hopefully, the analysis above has demonstrated that leaven and honey are not somehow inherently or metaphysically deficient, insufficient for an offering to God. In fact, I would like to argue that their very fullness constitutes the heart of the matter.

In what might be considered somewhat of a surprise, Sefer Vayikra opens with the rules for voluntary korbanot. God instructs Moshe as to the rules and procedure for "a man of you who brings an offering to the Lord" (1:2). The story of korbanot opens not with obligatory sacrifices, whether individual or communal, but with voluntary offerings, the individual's attempt to connect with God. By no coincidence, in this introductory segment (1:2-3), the stem k-r-v, meaning offering, approach, coming close and the like, appears seven times.

In other words, from the very start, the doctrine of korbanot propounded by the Torah constitutes a means for approaching God. The sacrifice constitutes not so much God's need, but man's need, the means by which he offers his self up to God. In a Copernican turn on the pagan model of sacrifices, the object of the sacrifice becomes not so much the meal of the divine entity, but a representation of the person who offers the sacrifice and a symbolic means to bridge the human-divine chasm (see Ramban 1:9).

But what constitutes the appropriate means of approach to God? Should man represent himself with the symbols of satiated fullness, of destination, complete realization and full-fledged being? Or perhaps, se'or and devash, while appropriate for an act of thanksgiving, are wholly inappropriate for an act of penitential approach, for raising up on the altar. In their stead, the Torah mandates matza, which symbolizes the redemption process. The Torah demands unleavened bread in all its humble lowliness, potential and becoming. The poor man's bread constitutes the right means for approaching God. In the words of Tehillim 70:6,

But I am poor and needy; O God, hasten to me!
You are my help and my rescuer; O Lord do not delay.

Only the bread of affliction, not leaven nor honey, sends this message.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Note: The explanation proposed in this shiur for the prohibition of se'or and devash and the mandating of matza can be easily reconciled with Rambam's historical claim. In the pagan model of sacrifices, the sacrifice constitutes the meal of the gods. The animal provides the main course, the meal offering is the bread, and the libation is the wine to wash it all down. The gods are in fact quasi-dependent upon humans for their food, and the sacrifices offer man both a means of appeasing and controlling the gods. From the perspective of pagan doctrine, it is simply inconceivable not to offer the gods the best, the fullest and the sweetest. Rambam's historical claims about pagan doctrine hit the philosophical nail right on the head.

- 1) See Rambam's overall theory of sacrifices in Guide III:32 and Ramban's rebuttal in Vayikra 1:9. How does Rambam's particular theory about mincha follow from his general theory? Is his theory convincing? Do Ramban's "proofs" from Sefer Bereishit settle the issue?
- 2) See the comments of Abarbanel (p. 27) and Netziv 2:11 for two other attempts to work out the problems discussed in the shiur above. Also see the famous statement of Berakhot 17a regarding se'or and the comments of Baal Ha-turim to 2:11.
- 3) See Shemot 12:25-28. Based upon these verses, Ibn Ezra (Shemot 40:2) maintains that chag ha-matzot was never celebrated during the forty year desert journey. He attributes this to a lack of wheat in the desert. Can some of the ideas in the shiur be restructured to provide a more conceptual explanation of these verses?
- 4) Reread Devarim 26:1-11. Try to explain why the time of bikkurim begins at Shavuot. After all, this is not mentioned in the verses. Explain why the verses of this passage, rather than the story of Shemot Chapter Twelve, constitute the core of the Haggada.

Visit our website: <http://etzion.org.il/en>