

THE NESIYA INSTITUTE  
**Passover Supplement**  
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*MATZAH:*  
**HUMILITY AND FREEDOM**



כי אין לך בן חורין יותר מזה שהוא בטל לגמרי למקור החירות, ומרמזים ב"הא לחמא  
עניא" שעתה אנו מבטלים עצמנו להשם יתברך עד שכל מה שלנו איננו שלנו כמו  
שנאמר: "כי ממך הכול ומידך נתנו לך" ולכן אנו אומרים: "כל דכפין ייתי ויכל, כל  
דצריך ייתי ויפסח."

- שם משמואל עמוד מ"ג

There is no person more free than one who has utter humility before the source of freedom. This is hinted at in "*ha lachma anya*" that now we annul ourselves to the Blessed Lord, until everything that is ours is not ours, as it is written, "everything is from You, and from Your hand we give to You," and therefore we proclaim, "Let everyone who is hungry come and eat, and all who are needy come and celebrate the Passover."

– *Shem miShmuel, Commentary on the Haggadah*



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## Sources for Reflection

### THE BREAD OF ESSENCE

Matzah is called *lechem oni* – bread of poverty – because... a poor person has only himself, and no property – and matzah likewise has nothing but the essence of the dough, which is water and flour... You may challenge, "What does poverty have to do with freedom? They are opposites!" But this is not a problem, since poverty itself teaches about redemption – for redemption is achievable only by one who goes out without any attachments to any other. This is in contrast to the slave, who is not independent, but is attached to his master; and so it is with one who has wealth – he is not independent, but is attached to his belongings, and in this there is no redemption. But one who is poor and has no belongings, but stands alone, himself (in his essential state), for him redemption is present. Thus the matza, which is *lechem oni*, teaches about people who are free people... about the very essence of the going out to freedom (which) is none other than the getting rid of all attachment... When there is no attachment, then is redemption present. And therefore He commanded us to eat lechem oni, which is matza, on the night of going out, because matza only has the essence of bread, and it has nothing attached of leavening, and it is like a poor person, in order that there should not be present any attachment on the night of the redemption – and then redemption can be acquired....

– Maharal of Prague, *Gevurot Hashem*

### EGO IN THE DOUGH

Rabbi Alexander, after he prayed, would say the following: "Master of the Universe, it is known and revealed before You that it is our will to do Your Will. What prevents us? The yeast in the dough and the subjugation to the non-Jewish nations. May it be Your Will that You save us from their hand and that we return to do the laws of Your Will with a perfect heart."

– Talmud Brachot 17a

Yeast in the dough - the *yetzer hara* (evil inclination) in our heart, which causes us to "puff up" (*machmitzeinu*).  
– Rasbi on Talmud Brachot 17a

### EXODUS AND PESACH MATZAH: DISTRESS AND JOY

They shall eat the flesh that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire, with unleavened bread and with bitter herbs... This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly: it is a Passover offering to the Lord... You shall observe the [Feast of] Unleavened Bread, for on this very day I brought your ranks out of the land of Egypt... They baked Matzah-cakes from the dough that they had brought out of Egypt, because it was not leavened; for they had been driven out of Egypt and could not delay, and they had also not prepared any [other] provisions.

– Exodus 12:8, 11, 17, 39

For seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, *lechem oni*, (bread of distress), for you departed from the land of Egypt in haste, so that you may remember the day of your departure from the land of Egypt every day of your life.

– Deuteronomy 17:3-4

### THE BREAD OF HUMILITY

*Ha lachma anya* – This is the matza, which commemorates freedom, "lechem oni" – see the Maharal. You can say that Israel in Egypt were reduced (or nullified) in their own eyes, to the point where they didn't believe in life. But in one way, this was good, because afterward when the sovereignty of heaven was opened up again, the servitude and self-negation that they had toward Pharaoh, they took toward the service of the Blessed Lord. And if this is the case after the Exodus, this teaches about freedom, because there is no person more free than one who has utter humility (or, has self-negated) before the source of freedom. This is hinted at in "*ha lachma anya*" that now we annul ourselves to the Blessed Lord, until everything that is ours is not ours, because "everything is from You, and from Your hand we give to You" (Chronicles I 29:14) and therefore we proclaim, "Let everyone who is hungry come and eat and all who are needy come and celebrate..."

– Shem miShmuel,

Commentary on the Haggadah

### FROM GOOD TO GREAT: A PARADOXICAL BLEND OF HUMILITY AND WILL

[A great leader] builds enduring greatness through a paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will... [Great leaders] are a study in duality: modest and willful, humble and fearless... [They] want to see the company even more successful in the next generation, comfortable with the idea that most people won't even know that the roots of that success trace back to their efforts... Those who worked with or wrote about the good-to-great leaders continually used words like *quiet, humble, modest, reserved, shy, gracious, mild-mannered, self-effacing, understated*... and so forth... [They] never wanted to become larger-than-life heroes. They never aspired to be put on a pedestal or become unreachable icons. They were seemingly ordinary people quietly producing extraordinary results.

– Jim Collins, *Good to Great*

## *The Nesiya Commentary*

Why is matzah so central to the celebration of Passover? During the Seder, we raise and lower it, break it in two, and cover and uncover the matzah repeatedly. What can matzah teach us?

When we hold up the matzah at the beginning of the Seder, it is called "*lachma anya* – לחמא עניא," which is Aramaic for the Hebrew "*lechem oni* – להם עוני." *Lechem oni* is usually translated as "bread of affliction." The term is usually understood to be referring to the daily food which the Israelites ate as slaves. But the full verse suggests that "*oni*" may refer not to the "affliction" of slavery but to an experience which combines distress and joy: "...you shall eat matzot...*lechem oni*, for you departed from the land of Egypt in haste, so that you may remember the day of your departure from the land of Egypt every day of your life." (Deuteronomy 16:3)

The Maharal, a 16<sup>th</sup> century commentator, interprets *lechem oni* as the "bread of poverty" or "impoverished bread," because it has only essential ingredients, and is without embellishments. He wants us to view matzah as a spiritual tool for becoming unattached. For the Maharal, matzah teaches that the "essence of going out to freedom is none other than getting rid of all attachment. And when there is no attachment, redemption is present." The Israelites are commanded to eat matzah "on the night of going out" because in that moment they need to stand "alone themselves," in their basic and essential nature. The ability to stand without attachments is essential to achieving freedom and redemption.

If we take the Maharal literally, one might assume that a poor person is more naturally able to experience freedom and participate in redemption than one who has been blessed with material comfort. Perhaps what the Maharal means is that in order to experience ourselves without attachments, we should aspire to see ourselves as poor people, without possessions. But how are we supposed to actually achieve this change in our personal lives?

In Hebrew, the word "*oni* – עוני" has the same root as the word "*anava* – ענווה," humility. *Lechem oni*, therefore, can also be understood as "bread of humility." The Shem miShmuel, an early 20<sup>th</sup> century Hassidic scholar, argues that *lechem oni* should be understood as representing the need for "*bitul* – ביטול," self-renunciation or humility before God, which leads to generosity. According to the Shem miShmuel, when we proclaim at the Seder "*ha lachma anya* – היא לחמא עניא – this is the bread of *oni*," we annul ourselves "until everything that is ours is not ours." The next thing we declare, he adds, is the call for "everyone who is hungry to come and eat." Through self-renunciation comes generosity.

Our journey from slavery to freedom is not supposed to lead to feelings of arrogance and entitlement, which it so easily could, but to their opposites: to humility and service. On Passover we embrace the basic, essential *matzah* in ourselves and reject the puffed up *hametz*. Matzah is the quintessential Jewish soul food because it reminds us to reduce ourselves yet act with noble purpose and freedom. When we are puffed up and full of ourselves, we miss opportunities to take part in a larger enterprise.

When we act with humility, we create great possibilities. First, it releases us from the endless pursuit of proving our worth and constantly seeking approval or honor. We can appreciate ourselves and each other just as we are. Second, acknowledging our limitations frees us to try to make a difference in small and constant ways. Finally, when we make ourselves humble we make space for other ideas and other people to be more important than ourselves.

It seems paradoxical that genuine humility enables us to act with great persistence and accomplish great things. Yet this fundamental truth is expressed in organizational psychology as well as Jewish spirituality. In the book, "Good to Great," Jim Collins claims that great leaders demonstrate "a paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will... [They are] modest and willful, humble and fearless." There is no paradox once we realize that humility is not the same as a lack of self-confidence. One can recognize one's essential limitedness yet still appreciate his or her potential to effect great change.

As we cover and uncover the matza throughout the seder, perhaps we are challenged to move from seeing matzah as the bread of affliction to seeing it as spiritual nourishment of our need for humility. By increasing our humility, we increase our commitment and ability to use freedom in service of causes larger than our own lives.

*Note:*

The meanings of the Hebrew words for "*matzah*" and "*hametz*" reinforce an understanding of matzah as representing a positive spiritual challenge to the way we see ourselves. The word "*matzah* – מצה" denotes that which is essential, which has been reduced to its essence: the noun "*tamtzit* – תמצית", "essence" or "concentrate" (which also evokes the concept of "reducing" in a positive sense, as in cooking), comes from the same root word as *matzah*. The verb "*le'matzot* – למצות" means "to extract, make the most of, to utilize to the fullest." *Hametz* - חמץ, on the other hand, means "leaven" or "ferment," and is related to the Hebrew verb *l'bachmitz* – להחמיץ, "to leaven" or "sour". In modern parlance, "*l'bachmitz*" means to miss an opportunity.

### ***Suggested Discussion Questions***

1. What are some of the attachments that keep you from experiencing yourself as free?
2. Do you think people can actually make themselves more humble? What's the difference between false and genuine humility? How can people increase their humility?
3. Is there a cause or greater purpose in the world that you would like to help serve? Are you free to work toward that cause? What are some of the limitations which may hold you back?
4. Think of a situation or relationship in your life which you would like to face with greater humility. How would greater humility increase your sense of freedom and ability to pursue your goals?