

## **This Pesach, Find Your Door. Then Open It.**



On one auspicious night in ancient Egypt, our ancestors' homes were passed over. The doors to their homes were marked with blood on the lintel, and they survived the onslaught of death that took the first born children of the Egyptians. To mark that night, and the coming redemptions and salvation that came our way, we celebrate Passover.

We know this all too well, but there is one aspect that goes little discussed: Why the door? Why not the chimneys, or the roof, or the windows? R. Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter, the Sfas Emes of Gur, notes that a doorpost is a liminal space, a near-definitional in-between zone, a place in which things transpire or pass. In a sense, the first night of Passover was the beginning of a climax of a narrative arc, in which the Jews are saved from persecution. The Sfas Emes tells us that the salvation had to occur through a doorpost to indicate that all this was only the doorstep to a far greater story.

A mystical tradition reads (or perhaps says) the word Pesach as פה פה (peh-sach), which translates to "mouth speaks." In Egypt, or Mitzrayim, which can be read as alluding to the Hebrew word for constraint, the Word was in exile, and upon redemption the Word was redeemed, too. Used countless ways by countless thinkers, in its simplest form, this wordplay communicates that the very act of communication, of learning how to put thoughts and feelings into words, can be the beginning

of freedom, liberation, and independence. Language then is a way of opening a door, or it benefits from the door being opened, or perhaps it is the door.

There are many doors to Pesach. Family is one door, history another, and one's personal life another. The many questions of the Seder night are tiny little doors (think *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, and consider why the word for the fourth letter and the word for door are the same— דלת). We offer two doors of our own, doors that took much to prop open. The first, by Dovid, is about the door that one lonely Pesach opened. The second, by myself, is about the door that crumbled, fragile matzoh might open, even if it breaks down. In doing so, we invite you to find your own door, and to do what you can to enter. As Todd Boss tells us, "It is Enough to Enter." Dayenu.

### **It Is Enough to Enter**

*Todd Boss*

the templar

halls of museums, for

example, or

the chambers of churches,

and admire

no more than the beauty

there, or

remember the graveness

of stone, or

whatever. You don't

have to do any

better. You don't have to

understand

the liturgy or know history

to feel holy

in a gallery or presbytery.

It is enough

to have come just so far.

You need

not be opened any more

than does

a door, standing ajar.

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### **“Spending the Seder Alone”**

Dovid Bashevkin, *Tablet Magazine*

“This night was different from all other nights,” he writes, “because I was finally asking different questions.”

### **“I Believe in the Broken Matzo”**

Yehuda Fogel, *Tablet Magazine*

Here, he explores “what shards of unleavened bread can teach us about the nature of faith.”

**HOLIDAYS**

# Spending the Seder Alone

This night was different from all other nights because I was finally asking different questions

**BY DOVID BASHEVKIN**

APRIL 01, 2020

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**T**HIS PASSOVER WILL BE DIFFERENT FROM ALL OTHER PASSOVERS. MANY families will be apart. Some, particularly the elderly, will be celebrating alone. I will not be with my parents or my brothers or sisters. Spending Seder by yourself is especially painful. The entire Passover story is framed around the family. Individuals were not redeemed in the Passover story—families were. So, celebrating alone is especially painful. And I know. Because several years ago, I spent my Passover Seder by myself.

Nine years ago, when I was 26, I celebrated my Seder alone in my parents' kitchen. My parents decided to travel to Israel to spend Seder with my sisters. I didn't want to join them. I felt too old to spend a week sharing a bedroom with my nieces and nephews. My mother begged me to find another family to spend the Seder with. But if I wasn't with them, I was adamant that I did not want to be an appendage in someone else's family. It was probably most painful for my mother. I didn't have a family of my own and the thought of me alone in our kitchen broke her heart. I'm nearly certain that she did not even tell my father about my plans. I was more forlorn than anxious. Everyone else was preparing for the festival of freedom; I prepared for an exilic hell.

Aloneness during the Seder is felt most acutely during *Ma Nishtana*, the part of the Seder when young children usually ask, "Why is tonight different than all other nights?" The possibility of a Passover alone was not lost on the Talmudic sages. If there is no one else at your Seder, the Talmud explains, you should ask these questions to yourself. Why is this

night different from all other nights, I asked alone in the kitchen. All other Passovers I ate with family; this year I am eating alone.

“There are days when solitude is heady wine that intoxicates you,” wrote Colette in her autobiography, “others when it is a bitter tonic, and still others when it is a poison that makes you beat your head against the wall.” Being alone can have varying effects on the psyche. Research has distinguished between solitude and loneliness: The former can be liberating, the latter is suffocating. Would I have a lonely Seder or a Seder in solitude?

As I sat in the kitchen, the acute sense of isolation began to descend. The Four Questions of Passover, which focus on freedom, became increasingly pessimistic. *Is this how my Seder is always going to feel? Will I ever have children to say ask the questions of the Seder to me? Will this night always feel so different?* Isolation is scary because when you're alone, your only companion is your thoughts. The reality of our mind, the volume of our stream of consciousness, the quiet of the room all become heightened when we're by ourselves. But in the stillness of my Seder, I also began to find comfort.

In their 2003 article, “Solitude: An Exploration of Benefits of Being Alone,” Christopher R. Long and James R. Averill outline the potential opportunities of being by yourself. One characteristic that aloneness cultivates is particularly relevant for Passover: freedom. Based on the 1994 book *Solitude: A Philosophical Encounter* by Philip Koch, they write:

The mere presence of other people, he notes, obliges us to coordinate our experience with theirs, thereby diminishing the scope of our actions. As one's experience of viewing a painting in a museum changes when another person walks up, our subjective experience is influenced by the slightest interaction with another person. We become conscious not only of the object we are viewing, but also of ourselves as viewers. Solitude can minimize such intrusive self-consciousness by reducing the immediate demands of experiencing ourselves as the object of another person's thoughts and actions.

Anthony Storr, in his 1988 classic *Solitude: A Return to Self*, argues that the freedom of solitude is a catalyst for creativity. When we are alone, we have the capacity to discover our individuality. Without other distractions, without social media, without the opinions of the masses, it becomes easier to articulate our own voice. “The human spirit is not indestructible,” writes Storr, “but a courageous few discover that, when in hell, they are granted a glimpse of heaven.”

Single and alone is never how I envisioned my Seder. But it did confirm Long and Averill's point that "one's freedom to search for one's spiritual essence is augmented by solitude." Before I was married, I would make sure to project a sense of confidence and assuredness that internally I really didn't have. I was nervous, I was confused, I was lost, but I never allowed myself to show it. I may have even convinced myself. Alone, drinking four glasses of that "heady wine," I could finally be honest. I could finally be vulnerable. Questions I took great care in avoiding the rest of the year—my career aspirations, my desire for a family—could finally be articulated. This night was different because I was finally asking different questions.

An hour into my Seder my solitude grew more comfortable and natural. For moments I even forgot I was alone. *And God took us out of Egypt, not through an angel and not through a seraph and not through a messenger, but the Holy One himself.* God had redeemed alone—my lonely redemption felt more natural. My Seder was almost over. *Who knows one?* I looked around, I knew one. *Chad Gadya, one kid goat.* I smiled. My Seder ended singing about a lone goat, finally redeemed.

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**HOLIDAYS**

# I Believe in Broken Matzo

What shards of unleavened bread can teach us about the nature of faith

**BY YEHUDA FOGEL**

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These fragments I have shored against my ruins.

—T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*

Eating matzo is an exceedingly fragile endeavor.

The matzo that my family eats during Passover comes in two varieties: machine-made and handmade. Machine-made matzo—you can find boxes of it in the kosher aisle of many supermarkets, even when it is not Passover—is mass produced. As such, it raises some halachic questions, which leads some of the more legislatively rigorous to exclusively eat handmade matzo. Machine-made matzo is square, dependable, and reliable. Handmade matzo has a more textured personality, more misshapen, uneven, interesting. Like a snowflake, each handmade matzo is a rough approximation of a circle, unique, ugly, beautiful, and special in its own way, with lumps, nooks, and crannies. It is also shockingly vulnerable, fragile, breakable.

Over Passover, my family ingests many boxes of handmade matzo, but in all of those boxes we tend to find very few complete matzot. We eat many matzo fragments, many half-matzot and broken-matzot and almost-matzot, but very few complete matzot. What is it about the bread of faith that makes the complete ones so hard to find? (Many people have a softer matzo, particularly in the Mizrahi community; although my mother's family is Sephardic, we did not have the custom to eat these matzot, so I will focus on the fragile matzot of my own childhood for now.) Perhaps by considering the thin matzo, we might learn something about the fragility of our own faiths, and the fragments left when these fragile faiths crack.

Matzo has many names, reflecting its many contradictions. The Torah refers to matzo as *lechem oni*, the bread of suffering. The Zohar (2:41a) has its own timeless formulation that it uses when referring to matzo: *michla d'meihefnuta*, the “bread of faith.” This, of course, has a Pauline feel to it, although it is often read less as a trans-substantive teaching than as one about historical fealty; as the biblical Jews had faith in God, to leave the comfortable discomfort from their lives of servitude in Egypt to depart into the unknown of the desert, hastily baked bread on their backs, so, too, we have faith in our savior, in our tomorrows, in what is yet to come. The bread of faith is thus symbolic of the faith to *leave*, to get out of a toxic situation with anything we have, with a faith that the hastily baked bread of departure will not just be the bread of suffering but also the bread of freedom.

In this key, the fragility of matzo speaks to the strength of faith, a faith that always believes that there will be a tomorrow, that there will be yet another day after this exile, even if the Messiah will come a day too late.

I believe that there is another angle to the fragility of matzo. If matzo is faith, and matzo is fragile, then it is no far jump to say that our faiths too are fragile. Perhaps matzo suggests to us that faith can be, and has always been, a vulnerable endeavor. We speak of the doctrines of faith, of the 13 *ikkarim*, as having a sort of durability that disallows fragility, but perhaps these grand faiths are as vulnerable as we are on the long road of life, and they too can break in the many matzo boxes in the back of Mother Courage’s wagon.

We live in fear of broken faiths, nervous of what might take their place. What the broken matzo teaches us is that when faiths break, they do not dissipate or disintegrate, they fragment. What remains are the smaller pieces of faith, the humble hopes and dreams of our lives, as we attempt to live our way through the questions that pierced our illusions. These are the small faiths, murmurs of a smile on our lips, that let us fall asleep at night thinking *just maybe* we’ll end up going to that therapist again, and something will yet pick up.

Over the long days and nights of COVID-19, I found myself drawn to one style of books more than any other: fragmentary books. My scattered attention and complete inability to focus on words on a page—or any YouTube video longer than 2 minutes and 40 seconds—collectively put a damper on any fiction reading, and completely killed any nonfiction



reading, leaving only the fragments for me. What counts as a fragmentary read? This definition is a sort of retrospective one for me, as this is something I realized late in the game.

It started with Camus' notebooks, which felt right in the early days of the plague. That was followed by Kafka's notebooks and then later Sontag's notebooks, with stops on the way for the aphorisms of Rouchefold, and the deeply redemptive despair of Cioran and Weil. The poetic fragments of Roethke and Sappho, Pascal's *Pensees*, and the books of Annie Dillard and Mary Ruefle, along with an assortment of other masters of the disjointed consciousness. How else could I rectify the thousand broken moments of awareness of each day, the mental servitude of my neck, bowed to my phone?

In one note I found in my computer from this time, I read words from Thomas Ligotti: "he had discovered that paradise of exhaustion where reality ends and where one may dwell among its ruins." Where reality ends, we dwell among its ruins. Where reality ends, we dwell among its ruins. I hope to attend better to the ruins, to the fragments all around me.

There is a peculiar Halacha about matzo: For matzo to be kosher, it cannot leaven, but it must be *capable* of leavening—its components must be leavenable.

This is interesting, as the halachic literature most commonly places matzo and *chametz*, leavened bread, as far apart as possible. If matzo is faith, in the symbolic family structure of Pesach, *chametz*, or leavened bread, is its antithesis. Where matzo is humble, unassuming, crunchy, *chametz* is puffed up, supercilious, tasty.

Why then must faith be capable of becoming its antithesis? (What, in fact, is its antithesis, what is the opposite of faith? Is it doubt? For many commentaries it appears so, doubt being synonymous with darker forces in parts of the rabbinic canon. Is it apathy, as the eternal words as Elie Wiesel tell us?) Perhaps faith must be capable of degenerating into its opposite conclusion to ensure its validity, its capability at attending to life itself. If there are "no ideas but in things," as the great Imagist creed goes, then perhaps we can have no faiths but in broken things, or at least in faiths that are breakable. If poems must be "imaginary gardens with real toads in them," then maybe faith must also have "real toads in it," so to speak.

Matzo made without the capability of becoming *chametz* is a garden without real toads in it, it is a faith incomplete, an answer without a question.

Perhaps it is the very constitution of our faith that demands vulnerability, necessitates risk. Matzo can only be matzo if it is capable of becoming *chametz*. Faith can only be faith if it is capable of becoming heresy. Faith with vulnerability, faith in vulnerability.

It makes a funny Jewish kind of sense that it is easy to find *shleimim*—complete, unbroken matzot—in the machine-made matzo boxes; in mass-produced faith it is easy to be whole, for all faiths are the same, with none of the risky vulnerability of the hand-produced. It is the homespun faiths, the hopes that we build with our hands and hearts that have the risk and reward of the fragile faith of matzo.

Viktor Frankl says:

There is always an element of risk involved in faith. One may spend one's entire life believing, yet God may remain silent and the loneliness of the soul may never be healed on this earth. Then to affirm that God is "silent in His love" is the highest creative commitment of which a man may be capable. The element of risk is the source of tension that keeps the act of faith forever young. Because of the risk one has to believe every day anew, one has to affirm again and again. Therein lies the essential significance of faith.

Or Merton, in his *Seeds of Contemplation*:

You cannot be a man of faith unless you know how to doubt. You cannot believe in God unless you are capable of questioning the authority of prejudice, even though that prejudice may seem to be religious. Faith is not a blind conformity to a prejudice—a "pre-judgement." It is a decision, a judgment that is fully and deliberately taken in the light of a truth that cannot be proven. It is not merely the acceptance of a decision that has been made by somebody else.

Best yet, Rav Kook's sparse formulation:

Faith in its purity, through the possibility of heresy.

The traditional formula for the statement of belief begins “I believe with a full faith,” *ani ma’amin b’emunah shleimah*. These words echo throughout the Jewish temple of time, words that have died on lips and lived past their sayers. In saying this statement, the sayer aligns themselves with generations of believers who have lived in the shade of these great hopes. But what would it mean to believe with a faith that is less than full, an *un-full* faith?

There’s a lot of talk these days about the so-called people of no faith, the nones, those who are perceived to have absconded from religious faith communities, either by conscious effort or the slow passing of time. In the popular imagination, the nones are a stand-in for a broader set of questions about religion, community, and tradition in the postmodern era, for the challenges of meaning-seeking in contemporary life, and we often forget to consider the remnant faiths left in the wake of religious identity, the stained glass from the dregs after all the wine is gone, elsewhere, moved on. We forget that the presence of absence need not bespeak the absence of presence, but rather the presence of something other, something changed, transmuted and repurposed, more often than not.

Some beliefs do shatter, break, and yet so many others remain, lurking in a fragmented form in the corner of the heart. But people bear the echoes, scars, and lines of what was. I make no judgment about these marks, and I stand with all those whose footprints are the only road, but I reflect on these traces, the fragments of faith, that which remains when one’s belief in the Belief is broken, when one’s faith in Faith is no longer feasible.

The prefix of the letter *bet* before the word *emunah*, faith or belief, means either in or with. *Emunah* means faith/belief; *b’emunah* means in or with faith/belief. Thus, although we traditionally think of the aforementioned line as “I believe with a full faith,” we may also read it as “I believe *in* a full faith,” in the possibility of a full faith. Might we also believe with a fragmented faith, and moreover, in a fragmented faith?

אני

אני מאמין

אני מאמין באמונה

אני מאמין באמונה שלמה

ואני  
ואני מאמין  
ואני מאמין באמונה  
ואני מאמין באמונה שבורה

I  
I believe  
I believe in faith  
I believe in complete faith

And I  
And I believe  
And I believe in faith  
And I believe in broken faith

### An enigmatic dream:

The Skolya Rebbe, in the middle of the 20th century, once dreamed that he stood on the edge of a great cliff, in a valley, with the Baal Shem Tov, the Besht. The Besht turned to him and asked: “Do you want to know how to be a true *eved hashem*, a servant of God?” “Of course,” the rebbe responded. The Besht jumped from the edge, landing and shattering in a million little pieces. The Skolya Rebbe ran down to collect all the fragments of the Besht, and when he arrived at the bottom, he was astounded to see that each fragment was a *komah shleimah*, a full-bodied miniature of the Besht.

### A comment:

According to contemporary psychologist James Hillman, we find in the mythical images of our cultures “archetypal containers for differentiating our fragmentation,” through which we might recognize some of our own self that exists through deconstruction.

This isn't just about the fragility or fragments of faith, but also about the granular moments that constitute this faith: our attention. "Attention is the beginning of devotion," Mary Oliver taught us, reminding us that our relationship with our spirit and our attention are closely linked. As we face the weapons of mass distraction that mine our attention, we do what we can, we simply must do what we can, to reclaim our souls. This starts with reclaiming the smallest moments of our lives. "Attention is the beginning of devotion," yes, and we lose this devotion (I lose this devotion) every time we switch tabs for the 19th time this minute, as if waiting for some magic djinn to appear from within the latticework of our unread tabs.

The Zohar (2:183b) has another striking term for matzo: **מיכלא דאסוותא**, the bread of healing. The bread of faith, easily broken, beloved in its parts, is also a salve. A paradoxical bread, matzo represents slavery and freedom alike, as the food of the enslaved and of the emerging freed slaves. Matzo is a transitional object of sorts, allowing us to experience both the pain that we have experienced, that we still do experience, and to our budding freedom from the suffering that weighs us down. (Might matzo break so easily from the tension of its inner contradictions?)

Mary Oliver has a delightful phrase, "the intimate interrupter," which refers to that wormlike little sense inside that drags our eyes and attention away from the thing we intend to attend to at each moment. The intimate interrupter can be friend or foe: Toggling between YouTube clips and Twitter rabbit holes, I rarely love my own intimate interrupter. But when I am struck and interrupted by a turn of phrase, a literary fragment, a word, an expression in a beloved book or on a loved one's face, then I cherish my intimate interrupter.

There's too much to say about matzo. Shmuel intuits this with his creative reading of the Torah's term for matzo, *lechem oni*, as "bread over which one answers [*onim*] many matters." I hope that these fragments join the many that have been said over this humble bread of faith. Aware of the vulnerability of faith, let us eat, and nourish, our broken faiths, our hurt faiths, our half-faiths. We need not fear our vulnerability, our pockmarks, our fragments. Let us have faith with toads in it, matzo real enough, substantive enough, to exist with the possibility of cracking. Even a broken matzo is a matzo. Even in our fragments, we can recognize ourselves.

If it is through the endless fragmentation of our attentional lives that we lose ourselves, then it might be through reclaiming the fragments that we might begin to redeem ourselves. So together, as Mary Oliver suggests, let us: "*pay attention/be astonished/tell about it.*"

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