



## לחם עוני Poor Man's Bread

### ■ The Poor Man's Piece

The Haggadah, our Pesach Seder “guidebook,” begins with a reference to matzah: *Ha lachma anya*, “this is the *oni* bread that our forefathers ate in the land of Egypt.” The source for this sentence is a Torah verse with similar wording and a bit more detail:

שִׁבְעַת יָמִים תֹּאכַל עָלֶיךָ מִצֹּת לֶחֶם עֹנִי  
כִּי בְּחֶפְזוֹן יָצָאתָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לְמַעַן תִּזְכֹּר אֶת יוֹם צֵאתְךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם...  
*For seven days you must eat matzot,  
bread of oni - for you left Egypt in haste; so that you remember  
the day you departed the land of Egypt...* (D'varim 16,3)

The Egyptians chose to feed matzah to our forefathers during their long years of enslavement - because it is difficult to digest, remains in the stomach a long while, and provides a feeling of satiation for many hours. Matzah thus became the staple of the diet prepared by the Egyptians for their millions of Jewish slaves.

Our Sages, Chazal, explained this uncommon phrase, “*oni* bread,” in three different ways, based on two roots from which the word *oni* can stem:

1. The first interpretation is based on the Hebrew root meaning “answer” or “say.” Chazal explain that *oni* bread is “bread over which is said many things” (P’sachim 115b) – a reference to that which we recite during the Seder, such as the Haggadah passages and the entire story of Pesach that

we are obligated to tell on that night. This explanation, however, seems to be far from the straightforward meaning of the above verse. Why, then, does the Gemara list it first?

2. The Gemara's second interpretation of "oni bread" is based on the Hebrew word for "poor." The Talmud states: "Just like a poor person eats broken-off pieces, and not whole loaves, so too, matzah comes in parts." This is why we break the middle matzah at the Seder and eat from it first, thus remembering the poor. This explanation seems to match the straightforward intent of the verse; why, then, is it presented only as number two?
3. Continuing with the root for "poor," the Gemara gives a final explanation for calling matzah *lechem oni*: "Just like a poor man heats the oven only precisely when his wife bakes, the same is true with this *oni* bread." The poor person does not have enough fuel to light his oven for long, and so he makes sure to do so for the least time necessary, baking each batch quickly – and the resulting bread is matzah. This explanation corresponds perfectly with the context of the verse, which speaks of the *haste* with which the Exodus occurred. Nevertheless, it is listed only third. Why?

To understand what our Sages want to teach us, let us begin with the second explanation, the one that emphasizes the "broken" nature of the bread. We can readily understand that a poor man cannot always afford to procure whole loaves; he must often suffice with broken or partial pieces. As a reminder of our dire poverty in Egypt, we break the middle of our three matzot into two parts, lift up the smaller broken piece, and say: "*Halachma anya*, This is the bread of poverty that our forefathers ate in the land of Egypt."

But let us delve into the deeper reason that a poor person tends to suffice with a broken piece, and we will discover extraordinary significance to our Sages' teachings.

A poor person, constantly preoccupied with ensuring that he has enough money each day, becomes impatient and short-tempered. Even if a generous friend would offer him a long-term loan or investment that would ultimately help him end his state of poverty, his immediate reaction would not be very accepting. "You think I'm worried about what will happen years from now?" he would ask. "What can you do for me today?!"

The Gemara makes a similar point, comparing the poor person to one who has spent years in a dungeon. If his jailers offer him a monetary grant and

tell him he will be released the next day, he is likely to say, “Forget the money, just get me out of here today!”

Just like a poor person is happy to settle for whatever slice of bread he can get, he also prefers immediate and simple solutions, even if they solve the problem only partially; he has no patience for a comprehensive, long-term program that will resolve the issue more completely.

### ■ Partial Hearing

The fact that the Israelites in Egypt were emotionally “poor” in this sense can be proven from their response to Moshe Rabbeinu’s original proposal to free them from Egypt. At the Burning Bush, G-d introduced Moshe to his historic mission:

לך וְאַסַּפְתָּ אֶת זִקְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם,  
ה' אֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם נִרְאָה אֵלַי...

*Go and assemble the elders of Israel and say to them:*

*“Hashem, the G-d of your fathers,  
appeared to Me... saying:”* (Sh'mot 3,16)

This is the introduction to Hashem’s good news, which is divided into three parts: Background, the immediate good news, and the long-term plan:

פָּקֹד פְּקֹדֹתַי אֲתֶכֶם וְאֵת הָעֲשׂוּי לָכֶם בְּמִצְרַיִם.

*I have remembered you and that which is being  
done to you in Egypt.*

וְאָמַר אֶעֱלֶה אֲתֶכֶם מֵעֲנִי מִצְרַיִם,

*And I said, I will raise you up from the affliction of Egypt,*

אֶל אֶרֶץ הַכְּנַעֲנִי וְהַחִתִּי... אֶל אֶרֶץ זָבַת חֶלֶב וְדָבָשׁ.

*to the land of the Canaanites and the Hittites...  
to a land flowing with milk and honey.* (Sh'mot 3,16-17)

Hashem is saying: “The time has come to help you... The immediate goal is freedom... The long-term goal is the Promised Land.” Hashem realizes that this announcement will be an abrupt surprise for Israel, and He promises Moshe: “Don’t worry; *they will listen to you.*” (verse 18)

Moshe follows G-d’s instructions, gives the message to Israel, and they believe and agree. But if we read carefully, we see that they actually heard and absorbed only part of the message; they simply ignored, or else didn’t hear, other parts of the prophecy:

וַיֵּאֱמֹן הָעָם וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ כִּי פָקַד ה' אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְכִי רָאָה אֶת עֲנִיָּם...

*The people believed and heard that*

*1. Hashem had remembered the Children of Israel,  
and that 2. He saw their suffering...* (Sh'mot 4,31)

It is perfectly clear from this verse that they heard and registered only the first two parts of the prophecy: Hashem's remembrance of Israel, and that He saw their suffering. The third part – the long-term promise of reaching the Land of Israel – did not register. They were interested only in leaving Egypt as quickly as possible, and had no strength or patience to think about their final destination or goal. As with the poor person and the dungeon prisoner, anything having to do with what is beyond the immediate future is not in their consciousness.

Thus, when Hashem promised Moshe that they would “*listen to your voice*” (verse 18), He meant that they would not resist or object. Their capacity to accept the various parts of the mission, however, would be limited by their patience and strength.

### ■ Lack of Hearing

Soon afterwards, we see even more clearly the extent of Israel's slave-mentality impatience. Moshe again appears before the nation, this time with a still greater and more comprehensive visionary prophecy, encompassing all the stages of the future Redemption from start to end. It begins with the physical rescue from Egyptian bondage, continues with a spiritual ascent towards being “G-d's special nation,” and ends with Israel's inheritance of Eretz Yisrael and the fulfillment of G-d's promises to their Patriarchs.

Moshe Rabbeinu presents the famous Four Expressions of Redemption – the four stages of the salvation of the nation – plus a fifth one (Sh'mot 6,6-8):

1. Release from physical bondage and back-breaking work:

וְהוֹצֵאתִי אֶתְכֶם מִתַּחַת סְבִלַת מִצְרַיִם,

*I will extricate you from under the burdens of Egypt,*

2. Liberation of the spirit from the emotional subjugation to their Egyptian masters:

וְהִצַּלְתִּי אֶתְכֶם מֵעֲבֹדָתָם,

*And I will save you from their work,*

3. Development of national aspirations, including laws, a land with borders, government, and economic independence:

וְגֵאֲלֹתַי אֶתְכֶם בְּזְרוּעַ נְטוּיָהּ וּבְשִׁפְטִים גְּדֹלִים.

*And I will redeem you  
with an outstretched arm and great signs.*

4. Spiritual aspirations for a Divine mission:

וְלִקְחֹתִי אֶתְכֶם לִי לְעַם וְהִיִּיתִי לָכֶם לֵאלֹהִים.

*And I will take you unto Me as a nation,  
and I will be your G-d.*

5. And the last and future stage is the inheritance of the Land of Israel and the fulfillment of G-d's oath to the forefathers:

וְהִבֵּאתִי אֶתְכֶם אֶל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁאַתִּי אֶת יָדֵי לְתֵת אֶתָּה  
לְאַבְרָהָם לְיִצְחָק וּלְיַעֲקֹב, וְנָתַתִּי אֶתָּה לָכֶם מִוְרָשָׁה, אֲנִי ה'.

*I will bring you to the Land that I vowed  
to give to Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov;  
I will give it to you as an inheritance; I am G-d.*

This plan is complete and perfect, leading step by step to the exalted destiny of the nation of G-d dwelling in His chosen portion of land, serving as a paradigm to the nations of the world in its spiritual and ethical values. Yet, when Moshe completes his speech to Israel, what reaction to this beautiful, visionary future does he receive?

וְלֹא שָׁמְעוּ אֶל מֹשֶׁה מִקְצֹר רוּחַ וּמִעֲבֹדָה קָשָׁה.

*They did not hearken to Moshe,  
because of [their] shortness of breath and hard labor.* (verse 9)

They did not hear, they did not absorb, they did not have patience; they were unable to breathe easily or relax sufficiently to hear the Divine plan of their own redemption.

### ■ Repeat Hearing

Let us compare the above to a very different scenario that took place just over a year later, at the foot of Mount Sinai. Moshe stands and once again presents Israel with an inspiring Divine vision and destiny – a vision even more uplifting and exalted than the previous one:

והייתם לי סגולה מכל העמים...  
ואתם תהיו לי ממלכת כהנים וגוי קדוש...

*You will be unto Me a treasured nation among all  
the nations... and you will be unto Me a kingdom  
of priests and a holy nation.* (Sh'mot 19,5-6)

And what was the nation's reaction this time? Their previous paltry *oni* – poverty of response due to their impatience and inability to register long-term goals – made way for a response of the same root: *vaya'anu*, an enthusiastic and vocal welcome of the chance to become G-d's nation:

ויענו כל העם יחדו ויאמרו כל אשר דבר ה' נעשה.

*The entire nation responded together and said,  
"Everything that G-d commanded, we will do."* (verse 8)

This was a complete turnabout: from lack of hearing and acceptance, to a united and pronounced willingness to take on whatever Divine mission is assigned them.

When Bnei Yisrael reach their final destination, Eretz Yisrael, they will build homes and plant orchards and vineyards, and will joyfully bring the first-fruits of their land to the Holy Temple. There, in accordance with the Torah's commandments, they will raise their voices in great feeling and thanks to G-d, expressing that which was buried within them from the day they were unable to respond:

וענית ואמרת לפני ה' אלהיך ... וירעו אתנו המצרים ... ונצעק אל ה'  
ויבאנו אל המקום הזה ויתן לנו את הארץ הזאת ...  
ועתה הנה הבאתי את ראשית פרי האדמה אשר נתתה לי.

*You shall say before Hashem your G-d:  
"...The Egyptians mistreated us... We cried out to G-d...  
He took us out of Egypt and brought us to this place and  
gave us this land... And now behold, I have brought  
the first fruits of the land You have given me..."* (D'varim 26, 5-10)

This is the final stage: *V'anita, You shall say*. You will no longer be listless and silent, but will rather have much that you will want to proclaim before G-d.

## ■ Completion and Rectification

The Seder meal that we conduct every Pesach is built on two fundamental principles. The first one is our reenactment of the poverty and humiliation

our ancestors suffered in Egypt, and the second is our compensation for everything we lacked during the Redemption from Egypt, both materially and spiritually.

We quoted above the Gemara's three explanations for the term "bread of *oni*," and we asked why the explanations that do not match the plain meaning of the verse are mentioned first. In fact, the order makes perfect sense if we start from the end of our historic deliverance. We know that the Pesach Seder includes the rectification of the "selective hearing" we suffered in Egypt. Our forefathers there were under tremendous strain and stress, unable to hear and respond to the prophetic and exalted national vision that Moshe painted for them; but now our matzah will be that over which "we say and explain many things," as per the Gemara's first explanation – and "the more one speaks about the story of the Exodus, the more praiseworthy he is," the Haggadah says.

Thus, we do not begin eating matzah at the Seder until we make sure to say aloud and with great feeling all that we couldn't even hear, and certainly not respond to, back in Egypt because of our sorry state.

The Mishna integrates the picture of poverty with our rectification thereof in these words: מתחיל בגנות ומסיים בשבח, "We begin [our recounting of the Exodus on Pesach] with a description of the tribulations, and conclude with the positive aspects of the story." We now see why this explanation was listed first.

Furthermore: One of the backbones of the Haggadah is the above-quoted passage known as *Mikra Bikurim*, which was joyfully read aloud when the land-owners brought their first-fruits to the Temple. Our Sages arranged each verse of this passage, and the relevant Medrashic teachings, for recital in the Haggadah, starting with *Arami oved avi...* What message were Chazal trying to transmit?

The passage emphasizes the Israelites' arrival in the national inheritance of their forefathers, and that Hashem had thus fulfilled His promise to bring their descendants to Eretz Yisrael. Our ancestors in Egypt were unable to hear of far-off visions of the Land of Israel and the like – but we, the later generations that arrived in the Holy Land, can certainly hear that fifth expression of Redemption:

וְהִבֵּאתִי אֶתְכֶם אֶל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁאַתִּי אֶת יָדֵי לִתֵּת אֶתְּהָ  
לְאַבְרָהָם לְיִצְחָק וּלְיַעֲקֹב וְנָתַתִּי אֶתְּהָ לְכֶם מִוְרֶשֶׁה אֲנִי ה'.

*And I will bring you to the Land that I have [vowed to give]  
to Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov,  
and I will give it to you as an inheritance; I am G-d.* (Sh'mot 6,8)

This is another turnabout: In Egypt, it was “*Pesach*” – meaning literally to “pass over” and remain quiet – and now it becomes “*peh-sach*,” meaning “a mouth that speaks,” a mouth filled with praise for Hashem.

With this, the Gemara’s second explanation of “*oni bread*” – that a poor person “eats broken-off pieces” – takes on new meaning: When we recite the blessings over the broken matzah at the Seder, we join it together with one of the two complete matzot – thus “upgrading” the broken and making it “complete.” As the Gemara states:

**All agree that on Pesach [as opposed to other days], we place the broken matzah inside the whole matzah and then eat of them.** (B'rachot 39b)

The broken matzah is the one we ate amidst our blood, sweat and tears as slaves in Egypt, while the complete matzah is that which we eat today, reclining as free men. This, too, is a type of rectification and completion.

The Gemara’s three explanations, from end to beginning, thus represent three stages:

- Completion (compensation for lack of speech);
- Deficiency leading to filling-in (the whole piece and the broken piece, “the poor man eats from a broken piece”);
- Deficiency and haste (“The poor man lights the oven just as his wife bakes...”).

The Gemara’s last explanation refers to one who is so poor that, in order to save firewood, he must bake the dough even before it has fully risen. This stands for the total lack that we suffered the night we left Egypt: No time, no food, no certainty as to what would happen next.

The Gemara’s second explanation refers to a *broken* matzah, together with which we also eat a *complete* matzah.

And the first explanation applies where there is no lack, but only *abundance*: Our mouths are filled with praise, where once there was only silence.



## ■ Absolute Knowledge

We noted above that the fifth stage of Redemption – arrival in the Land of Israel – is somewhat separate from the other stages. Why is this? And why do we drink a cup of wine for each of the other stages, but not for this last one of Eretz Yisrael?

Let us look at the difference between the last two stages. The fourth stage, as we saw above, contains the elements of ולקחתי, G-d's taking us unto Him as His nation, and וידעתם, Israel's absolute and irreversible knowledge that Hashem is their G-d forever and ever. The declaration that "I am Hashem your G-d" is permanent and everlasting:

וְאִם גַּם זֹאת בְּהֵיטֵב בְּאֶרֶץ אֹיְבֵיהֶם לֹא מֵאֲסִתִּים וְלֹא גַעְלֹתִים לְכַלְתָּם  
לְהַפֵּר בְּרִיתִי אִתָּם כִּי אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיהֶם.

*Even when they are in their enemies' land,  
I will not be so disgusted with them that I would destroy them  
and break My covenant with them;  
for I am Hashem their G-d.* (Vayikra 26,44)

But the fifth stage – והבאתי, G-d's promise to bring us to the Land that He promised to our forefathers – is different. It does not include any element of "absolute knowledge" of such, because Israel's presence in the Land of Israel is not 100% guaranteed. As the Torah tells us straight out in Parashat Bechukotai, just before the verse quoted above:

וְהָאָרֶץ תַּעֲזֹב מֵהֶם וְתָרַץ אֶת שְׁבֹתֶיהָ ...

*The land will be left behind by them...* (verse 43)

Only in the Final Redemption will Bnei Yisrael remain permanently and eternally in the Land of Israel, as the Prophet tells us:

...בְּהוֹצִיאִי אֶתְכֶם מִן הָעַמִּים וְקִבַּצְתִּי אֶתְכֶם מִן הָאָרְצוֹת אֲשֶׁר נִפְצַתֶם בָּם ...

*...when I take you out from among the nations,  
and gather you from the lands in which you were scattered...*

And that period includes the element of "knowledge:"

וְיָדַעְתֶּם כִּי אֲנִי ה' בְּהֵבִיאִי אֶתְכֶם אֶל אֶדְמַת יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל הָאָרֶץ  
אֲשֶׁר נִשְׂאָתִי אֶת יָדִי לָתֵת אוֹתָהּ לְאַבּוֹתֵיכֶם.

*and you will know that I am G-d when  
I bring you to the Land of Israel, to the land that  
I raised my hand to give to your forefathers.* (Yechezkel 20,41-42)

In short, the first four stages of Redemption are “forever,” but that of the entry into the Land of Israel is, until the Final Redemption, still dependent on our deeds. Once we are given the Land, there will be no further Exile.

