

Hasidic Tales of Pesach: “Matzah You Shall Eat”

(From *A Treasury of Chassidic Tales* by Rabbi S. Y. Zevin)

A Jewish Blood-Libel

Word reached Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev that the owners of the local matzah bakeries were forcing the young women who kneaded and rolled the dough to work from early morning until late at night.

He stood up in the synagogue and cried out: "Gentile anti-Semites always claim that Jews knead their dough for the matzos with the blood of Christians. That is an outright lie! It is not Christian blood they use, but the blood of the young daughters of Israel who are being overworked in our matzah bakeries!"

A Presumption of Integrity

Surrounded by his learned sons and a retinue of elder chassidim, Reb Avraham of Chechanov would go out to the countryside year by year to supervise a group of Jewish farmers as they reaped a quantity of wheat expressly for *matzas mitzvah*.

It was his custom to walk all the way home with one hand holding onto the side of the wagon which was piled high with sheaves, so that his attention should not be distracted even for a moment from his task of watching out against the remotest chance of contact with moisture. Once the wagon came to a deep puddle. In order to skirt it the tzaddik was forced to take his hand off the wagon briefly, while its huge wooden wheels splashed their way straight through the middle. When they came home he said nothing, and his chassidim proceeded as usual to thresh and winnow and sift, and then stored the wheat away in the granary. Not long before Pesach, however, the tzaddik instructed his son, Reb Yaakov of Yazov to write to a certain individual in nearby Pultusk requesting him to send him wheat for *matzas mitzvah*.

His son was amazed: "But we have our own wheat, on which we've all worked so hard in preparing and supervising!"

His father answered, "That moment at which I took my hand off the wagon constitutes a distraction of my attention...and I can't call matzah made from that wheat *shemurah*."

The son was insistent: “And what makes you think that when that individual in Pultusk watched over his wheat *he* did not have even one moment’s inattention?”

His father silenced him curtly: “If a Jew comes along and tells me that he has properly-supervised *shemurah* matzah, then I can rely utterly on the presumption that he is telling the truth... But as for me, I *know* that my attention was distracted.”

Stature is Self-Evident

Early in the Seder, the middle one of the three matzos on the table is broken into two unequal parts, the larger being set aside for the *afikoman*...

During the seder at the table of Reb Menachem Mendel of Lubavitch in 1865, one of the guests took his own broken matzah in hand and examined it carefully in order to determine which was the bigger part to be put aside for Afikoman. The rebbe noticed this, and in his comment exploited the fact that in addition to its usual meaning — “big” — the word *gadol* is used in Torah circles as a noun to denote a scholar of outstanding stature. He said: “If a great one (a *gadol*) needs to be measured, then a small one is greater than he is ...”

His grandson, Reb Shalom Ber, then a child of five, was present and heard the comment. Years later, when he himself was rebbe, he once said: “From that day on I developed a distinct dislike for the kind of *gadol* who has to be measured.”

A Breath of Life

While reciting the Haggadah on Seder night, when Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev came to the words “*matzah zo*” – “This matzah” – he was so swept up in the rapturous ecstasy of *dveikus* at the prospect of fulfilling the mitzvah of eating matzah that he literally fell off his chair onto the floor under the table, upturning the Seder plate, matzos and all. By the time he came to, the table had been set afresh. As he put on the long white *kittel* which was now handed to him to replace the one which had just been stained with wine, he mouthed the beloved words with the visible delight of one who has fainted and now draws a deep breath of smelling salts: “Ah ... This matzah!”