

When Eating Is A Mitzvah

Category: Holidays, Pesach

How is Passover food different, from all the foods of the year?

Cholent and Hamantashen

A stranger stranded in a Jewish home who tries to learn about Jewish life will come to the conclusion that out of the 613 mitzvos, at least 600 of them have to do with food.

On Shabbos, for example, the Jews are constantly busy with food, whether gefilte fish, chicken soup or cholent.

Any Jewish holiday, when you think about it, has its own special food, whether hamantashen on Purim, latkes on Chanukah, kreplach before Yom Kippur or kneidlach on Passover—everything revolves around food.

But when you really look at Jewish holidays, you realize that every holiday has a mitzvah that makes it unique: Rosh Hashanah has the shofar, Chanukah has the menorah, Sukkos has the sukkah, and Purim has the megillah. Each one has its own Jewish ritual.

Now, what special ritual marks Passover? Eating... matzah.

The Only Real Eating Mitzvah

The one holiday specifically celebrated with food is Passover. The entire holiday revolves around food—the eating of matzah. And that's not the only thing we must eat on Passover. Besides matzah, there's also a mitzvah to eat marror—and in the Temple's times, there was the obligation to eat the Passover sacrifice too.

That's why we actually recite a brachah, the blessing said over a mitzvah, on the eating of the matzah, as well as on the marror—and in the Temple's times, on the Passover sacrifice.

Passover is the only time in Judaism when we recite the full traditional blessing

on mitzvos with regards to various foods. In general, we recite the full mitzvah blessing on mitzvos such as the blowing of the shofar, or the washing of the hands before bread, or the handling of the lulav—but before eating, we generally recite just the blessing over food, not the full blessing, “Blessed are you Hashem, Our G-d, King of the Universe, Who has sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us...”

Passover is the only holiday on the Jewish calendar with a religious obligation to eat. There’s no other mitzvah (with the exception of the ancient Temple sacrifices) in which we are commanded to eat a specific food.

On Shabbos, for example, there is the mitzvah of enjoying Shabbos—the Jew must literally take pleasure in Shabbos. Halachah, Jewish law, comes along and states: “And with what shall one enjoy Shabbos? ...Each locale, according to its [culinary] customs, shall enjoy Shabbos with the foods and drinks considered to be the most distinguished.”

In other words, the pleasure itself is the mitzvah. The Sages established that the way to take pleasure in Shabbos is through food and drink. However, one who suffers by eating has no obligation to eat, as the halachah states: “A person for whom eating is detrimental and thus takes pleasure in not eating, has no obligation to eat on Shabbos at all—and it’s practically prohibited for him to eat so that he does not suffer on Shabbos.”

We find a similar ruling with regards to a dream fast.

In Judaism, there is something called the dream fast: When someone dreams a particularly bad dream and wakes up in the morning terrified by the dream, he is permitted to fast that day so that the dream does not come true. The halachah states that if one wakes up Shabbos morning having had a nasty nightmare, he is permitted to fast on Shabbos. Why? Because “he derives greater pleasure from fasting than he would get by eating and drinking while haunted by the nightmare.”

In like manner there is the positive commandment in the Torah to be happy on Yom Tov, or Jewish holiday. The Sages explain: “How does one make children happy on Yom Tov? One gives them roasted treats and nuts.” As for the womenfolk, “one purchases clothing and jewelry for them to the best of his financial ability.” And as for the menfolk, the halachah states that men are to

enjoy the meat and wine—meaning that the food itself is not the mitzvah but rather the vehicle by which one comes to fulfill the happiness-on-Yom-Tov mitzvah.

The only case in which the mitzvah itself is to eat is on Passover—to the extent that the entire holiday in the Torah itself is named for its food: The Festival of Matzos.

Why?

So what's so special about eating that it became a mitzvah on Passover?

When a person travels to some faraway destination and he wants to really get to know and experience local life, he eats the local food. It makes no sense to tour China and not eat Chinese food—the way to have a real experience is specifically through food. In other words, when you're invited to a Chinese dinner, you're not going to meet Chinese people or speak Chinese—you're going to eat Chinese food.

On Passover, the mitzvah is to experience the experience of the Egyptian exodus. It's not enough to commemorate the Exodus—we do that every day. On Passover, “one is obligated to see himself as if he actually departed from Egypt”—he needs to experience it and feel as if he was actually a slave and departed to freedom.

The best way to experience a particular experience is through food. When a person eats matzah, he feels the “poor man's bread” as he breaks his teeth and his belly aches. Only then can he personally experience how the Jews felt when they were slaves and ate “the poor man's bread.” And when a person eats the maror, the bitter herbs, and tears stream down his face, he has successfully connected with the suffering of the Jewish People and only then can he truly feel the joy of going out into freedom—then he feels it in his flesh and blood. That's why all the holiday mitzvos at Passover time specifically involve eating.

This also explains why all the holidays and indeed, all of Judaism, is built upon food. The mitzvos of Passover teach us that the best way to pass the experience on to the next generation is through food.

Everyone remember's Grandma's gefilte fish. In many families, the entire holiday

consists mainly of eating the foods that Grandma would make—it is specifically these things that strengthen their connections to Judaism more than anything else; the aroma of the food brings back long-lost memories and brings them back home to the fold of Judaism.

So if you want to strengthen your children's Jewish identity—add a Jewish food to the mix. It's something you can always grow with; there's always something new to add.

It's very Jewish—and it tastes good too.