



The Broken Whole

Why do we start the Seder by breaking a matzah? I have plenty of broken ones already!

Yachatz

Towards the beginning of the Seder, we do something a little odd: we take the middle matzah and break it in half. The larger piece gets hidden away for the afikoman, and the smaller one goes right back into the Seder plate.

Why do we break the matzah? Some might say it's for the afikoman—but if that's the case, couldn't we have just used a chunk from the other two matzahs? There is a two-matzah minimum for the seder, like any shabbat and holiday meal; so, why don't we just use those for afikomen as well (after we say the Hamotzi)? Why include a third matzah, and snap it in half before the Haggadah begins?

The Rebbe explains (in his Haggadah) that we need a broken matzah when we tell the story of the Exodus, because the Haggadah begins with the words: "Ha lachma anya"—"This is the bread of affliction that our ancestors ate in Egypt." That statement, and the entire story of the Exodus, should be told over a "poor man's bread"—a broken matzah, not a whole one.

But you may have noticed that "poor man's bread" — a bread of slavery — isn't the usual description of matzah. Everyone knows that we eat matzah because Pharaoh and his people rushed the Jews out of Egypt so quickly there wasn't even time to let the dough rise. So they made flat, simple matzahs—and that's what we eat to remember it. That's not "poor man's bread"; to the contrary, it's the bread of a wealthy, free person—just a free person who happens to be in a very big hurry.

So there are really *two* reasons for matzah—slavery and freedom! In fact, these are both mentioned in the Torah itself. In Deuteronomy

(16:3) it says, “For seven days you shall eat matzah, the bread of poverty, because you left Egypt in haste.” Rashi explains: it’s both the bread we ate in poverty during slavery, and it’s the bread we took with us when we ran for our lives. It’s both.

So, to really feel the element of the “poor man’s bread,” we need a broken matzah. A poor person doesn’t get a whole one—he gets a piece. So before we begin telling the story of the Exodus, we break the matzah.

The Full Story

But I’m not done yet. I understand why I need a broken matzah at the seder, but why break a *perfectly good* matzah? I have boxes and boxes of matzahs that broke during shipping! Why not just use one of those?

The Rebbe explains in a talk that this middle matzah actually tells the entire story of the Exodus. The smaller piece—the one we leave on the Seder plate and use while reciting the Haggadah—represents *the lowest point* in our history: the suffering, slavery, and humiliation the Jewish people endured in Egypt. Meanwhile, the larger piece gets hidden away for the *afikoman*, which reminds us of the Korban Pesach, the offering that symbolizes freedom and abundance.

The middle matzah reflects our journey—from rock bottom to ultimate redemption. That’s why we don’t start with a broken matzah. We deliberately take a complete one and split it ourselves. One half stays visible, representing exile. The other half is hidden for later, symbolizing the complete and final redemption. (See *Toras Menachem* Vol. 28, p. 14 and onward.)

Yitzchak’s Claim

But one more question: why the *middle* matzah? Why not the top one or the bottom one?

There is a technical halachic explanation—when we say *Hamotzi*, the blessing on bread, the full matzah needs to be on top, closest to access. Since the top matzah needs to remain whole for that blessing, we break the middle one instead (See the Rebbe’s Haggadah).

But there’s also a fascinating explanation brought in the commentaries.

The Talmud (*Shabbos* 89b) describes a future moment when G-d will turn to the forefathers and say, “Your children have sinned.”

Abraham—the embodiment of kindness—surprisingly responds, “Then let them be wiped out for the sanctity of Your Name.” In other words, he justifies the punishment. G-d expects to hear a defense on behalf of the Jewish people, so he turns to Jacob, who represents compassion and who endured great hardship raising his children. Maybe *he’ll* plead for them? But Jacob gives the same answer: if they sinned, they deserve to be punished.

Then G-d says, “I can’t rely on the elders, and I can’t rely on the youngsters.” Meaning, the solution won’t come from Abraham—the “grandfather”—and it won’t come from Jacob, the “youngest” of the forefathers. So He turns to Yitzchak, who represents strict justice, and says: “Your children have sinned.” But Yitzchak pushes back: “My children? Weren’t they *Your* children when they stood at Mount Sinai and declared, ‘We will do and then we will understand’? Back then, You called them ‘My firstborn son.’ And now that they’ve sinned, they’re suddenly mine?”

Then Yitzchak makes an incredible argument. “How much could they have really sinned?” he asks. “A person only lives seventy years. For the first twenty, he’s considered a minor; not even held fully accountable in the heavenly court. That leaves fifty. Half of that time he’s sleeping—not sinning. That’s twenty-five. Then there’s time spent eating, praying, and running errands—basic human stuff. Let’s shave off another half. So what’s left? Maybe twelve and a half years of real opportunity to mess up.

Yitzchak finishes with a suggestion: “Split it with Me! You take half the responsibility, and I’ll take on the other half.”

That’s why we break middle Matzah – representing *Yitzchak’s* on Seder night. We’re reminding G-d that it was Yitzchak who stepped in, made the case, and took responsibility. On this night, a time when the gates of heaven are open wide for redemption, we call upon that moment—when Yitzchak and G-d split the burden for our mistakes—and say: Remember that? It’s time to redeem Your people again. (See *Shabbos* 89b and *Shaar Yissaschar*, Nisan, Aggadta d’Pischa §5, quoting the Shem Shlomo.)

The Personal Reason

There is another, deeper reason for the broken matzah. There’s a well-known Chassidic saying: “There’s nothing more whole than a broken heart.” That doesn’t mean someone crushed by tragedy, G-d forbid. It refers to a person who lives with humility—who knows that everything they have comes from G-d.

The Rebbe once pointed out that this isn't just a poetic turn of phrase. It's something you can actually find in Jewish law—and that brings us to this week's Torah portion—*Vayikra*.

Every mitzvah we do brings us closer to G-d. Whether it's a man putting on tefillin or a woman lighting Shabbat candles, each act connects us to our Creator. But there's one category of mitzvah where the very purpose is closeness— and it's in our Parsha. It's baked into the name: *Korban*, from the word *karov*, means “to draw near.” The whole idea of a korban is about bringing ourselves and our world closer to G-d.

And when it comes to korbanos, the Torah is very particular.

The *mizbeach*, the altar where they're offered, has to be completely whole. If there's even a tiny chip in one of the stones, it disqualifies the entire altar—and any offering brought on it is no good. That stone has to be replaced right away.

Even the *wood* used to burn the offering must be in perfect condition. If it's moldy or worm-eaten, it's invalid.

And certainly the *animal* brought as the korban must be the best—whole and healthy, without a single blemish, not even too skinny. Only the finest is worthy of being offered in the Beis HaMikdash.

The *kohein*, the person bringing the offering, also must be whole—not physically blemished. Everything has to be in a state of perfection when you come to ask for atonement

And if all the surrounding elements must be perfect, how much more so the person seeking atonement—he too must reach a state of inner wholeness.

But how does a person achieve that level of wholeness? The Rebbe explains that true spiritual wholeness comes through a *broken ego*. As long as someone hasn't fully regretted their actions, as long as their heart is only *partially* broken, they're still distant from complete teshuvah. Real return comes from total humility. (*Toras Menachem* vol. 44 p. 210)

So this halacha teaches us something powerful: for the offering to be accepted, everything must be perfect—the altar, the wood, the animal, the kohein. And if *they* must all be whole, the person offering the korban must be whole as well. But what does it mean to be a

“whole sinner”? That’s the paradox: a sinner becomes truly whole when his heart breaks over the distance between himself and G-d. When he shows up with a broken heart, he’s actually more whole than ever—because *there is nothing more whole than a broken heart*.

Over the past year and a half, every Jew is walking around with a broken heart. This year, we turn to G-d and say: “You are the Healer of broken hearts.” On this Pesach, we ask that He heal the great wound that began on October 7th, and send us Eliyahu HaNavi to herald the coming of the true and complete redemption—now.