

Is Matzah a Mitzvah for All Seven Days of Pesah?

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It's a well-known rule of *halakhah* that a Jew is obligated to eat *matzah* on the first night of Pesah... and *only* on the first night of Pesah. As usual, we find the clearest formulation of this rule in Rambam's *Mishneh Torah (Hilkhot Hametz Umatzah 6:1)*:

מצות עשה מן התורה לאכול מצה בליל חמשה עשר שנאמר בערב תאכלו מצות... אבל בשאר הרגל אכילת מצה רשות: רצה אוכל מצה; רצה אוכל אורז או דוחן או קליות או פירות. אבל בליל חמשה עשר בלבד חובה, ומשאכל כזית יצא ידי חובתו.

It is a positive *mitzvah* of the Torah to eat *matzah* on the night of the fifteenth (of Nissan),¹ as it is said: "In the evening you shall eat *matzot*" (Exodus 12:18)... during the remainder of the festival, though, the eating of *matzah* is a voluntary act (*r'shut*): should one wish, one may eat *matzah*; should one wish, one may eat rice or millet or parched ears of corn or fruit. But only on the night of the fifteenth is it an obligation (*hovah*), and when one has eaten an olive's-bulk one has fulfilled that obligation.

The *Shulhan Arukh (Orah Hayyim 475:7)* puts it simply:

אין חיוב אכילת מצה אלא בלילה הראשון בלבד.

The obligation to eat *matzah* exists on the first night only.

¹ See *B. P'sahim 120a*. The Torah instructs that we should eat the *korban Pesah*, the Pesah sacrifice, along with *matzah* and *m'rorim (maror)*. From this, one might conclude that in the absence of the *korban* there is no longer a Toraitic requirement to eat either *matzah* or *maror*. That's the opinion of R. Aha bar Yaakov, who holds that both foodstuffs are considered *d'rabbanan*, a Rabbinic requirement one, during post-Temple times. Rava, on the other hand, holds that while *maror* is definitely *d'rabbanan* in the absence of the *korban*, *matzah* remains a Toraitic requirement today on the basis of Exodus 12:18, which obligates us to eat *matzah* and doesn't mention the sacrifice. Rambam, like all other authorities, rules according to Rava on the basis of the *baraita* cited in the text.

But wait a minute! Doesn't Exodus 12:18, the source of this obligation, literally speak of a requirement to eat *matzah* all throughout the festival?

בְּרֵאשִׁון בְּאֶרְבַּעָה עָשָׂר יוֹם לַחֹדֶשׁ בְּעֶרְבֹת תֹּאכְלוּ מַצֹּת עַד יוֹם הָאֶחָד וְעֶשְׂרִים לַחֹדֶשׁ בְּעֶרְבֹת:

In the first month, on the fourteenth of the month in the evening, you shall eat *matzot*, until the twenty-first of the month in the evening.

So how do Rambam and all other authorities read this as a requirement to eat *matzah* only on the first night? The source² is the Talmud, *B. P'sahim* 120a, which brings the following midrash:

תניא ... "ששת ימים תאכל מצות וביום השביעי עצרת לה' אלהיך" - מה שביעי רשות, אף ששת ימים רשות.
מאי טעמא? הוי דבר שהיה בכלל ויצא מן הכלל ללמד, לא ללמד על עצמו יצא, אלא ללמד על הכלל כולו יצא.
יכול אף לילה הראשון רשות? תלמוד לומר "על מצת ומררים יאכלהו."
אין לי אלא בזמן שבית המקדש קיים, בזמן שאין בית המקדש קיים מניין? תלמוד לומר בערב תאכלו מצת - הכתוב קבעו חובה.

A *baraita*: "You shall eat *matzot* for six days. And on the seventh day you shall hold a solemn assembly to Adonai your God" (Deuteronomy 16:8) – just as on the seventh day the eating of *Matzah* is voluntary [i.e., not a *hovah*], so too are the other six days voluntary.³

What's the reasoning? This is a case of a thing that was included within a general rule and then made an exception to that rule in order to teach us something. (When this happens) it does not teach us something only about itself but about all the cases falling under the general rule.

Does this mean that the first night, too, is voluntary? No, because Scripture says: "They shall eat [the *korban Pesah*] along with *matzot* and bitter herbs" (Numbers 9:11).

From that verse I learn the rule that applies when the Temple is standing. But from where do I derive the rule for the time when the Temple is not standing? Scripture says: "In the evening you shall eat *matzot*" (Exodus 12:18) – the verse establishes [the first night] as an obligation (*hovah*).

So the Torah, as the Rabbis read it, exempts us from any requirement to eat *matzah* during *Pesah* after the seder. If you don't especially like *matzah* – and really, who does? - this has to count as a pretty good deal. On the other hand (and you just knew there was another hand, didn't you?), this leniency raises two questions.

The first question is a textual one. Yes, according to the Rabbinic midrash there is no requirement that we eat *matzah* for all seven days of *Pesah*. But this *d'rash* stands in glaring contradiction to the plain, literal (*p'shat*) sense of several verses in addition to Exodus 12:18.

² See *Magid Mishneh* to Rambam *loc. cit.*

³ See *Torah T'mimah* to Deut. 16:8, no. 32: this midrash explains why we recite the blessing *al akhilat matzah* ("Who has commanded us concerning the eating of *matzah*") only at the seder and not when we eat *matzah* during the remainder of the festival.

- Exodus 12:15: שְׁבַעַת יָמִים מַצּוֹת תֹּאכְלוּ – “You shall eat *matzot* for seven days.”
- Exodus 23:15: אֶת־חַג הַמַּצּוֹת תִּשְׁמֹר שְׁבַעַת יָמִים תֹּאכַל מַצּוֹת בְּאֶשֶׁר צִוִּיתֶךָ – “You shall observe the festival of *matzot*. You shall eat *matzot* for seven days, as I have commanded you.”
- Leviticus 23:6: וּבַחֲמִשָּׁה עָשָׂר יוֹם לַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה חַג הַמַּצּוֹת לַה' שְׁבַעַת יָמִים מַצּוֹת תֹּאכְלוּ – “On the fifteenth day of this month is the festival of *matzot* to Adonai; for seven days you shall eat *matzot*.”
- Numbers 28:17: וּבַחֲמִשָּׁה עָשָׂר יוֹם לַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה חַג שְׁבַעַת יָמִים מַצּוֹת יֵאָכֵל – “On the fifteenth day of this month there shall be a festival; *matzot* shall be eaten for seven days.”
- Deuteronomy 16:3: לֹא־תֹאכַל עִלּוֹ הַמֶּץ שְׁבַעַת יָמִים תֹּאכְלֵנּוּ מַצּוֹת לַחֶם עִנִּי – “You shall not eat (the Pesah sacrifice) with *hametz*; for seven days afterwards you shall eat *matzot*, the bread of affliction/poverty.”

The Torah (by which we mean here the Pentateuch, the text of the Five Books of Moses *without* the overlay of the Rabbinic midrash) obviously understands the eating of *matzah* to be a seven-day activity, not limited to the first night. Even Deuteronomy 16:8, the *pasuk* from which the midrash derives its one-day-only rule, means something different on its face: you shall eat *matzot* for six days and *then* “on the seventh day you shall hold a solemn assembly to Adonai your God.”⁴ The verse gives no indication that one would *not* eat *matzot* on that final day of *yom tov* (apart from the midrash’s determination to read it that way). Indeed, why call the entire seven-day festival *hag hamatzot* if there is no requirement to eat *matzah* after the first day?⁵ True, the Rabbis are not bound to the *p’shat* interpretation of the Torah text. Midrash exists precisely to uncover or to justify⁶ a deeper layer of meaning not apparent on the literal surface. Still, the gap between the *p’shat* and the *d’rash* in this case is noteworthy.

The second question relates to how we experience the holiday. Pesah in the spring is clearly a parallel to the seven-day festival of Sukkot in the fall. Yet while we perform positive *mitzvot* (*sukkah* and *lulav*) every day of Sukkot, the final six days of Pesah involve no special *mitzvah* beyond the negative one of abstaining from *hametz*. True, this can be explained by the fact that each of the days of Sukkot is considered something of a *yom tov* in itself, a description that doesn’t apply to the last six days of Pesah.⁷ But it means that our observance of Pesah is bereft of any distinctive positive ritual act beyond the first night.

Perhaps for these reasons, some commentators and halakhic authorities over the centuries have suggested that the eating of *matzah*, if not a *hovah*, an actual obligation, should be considered a

⁴ The *m’farshim* offer other explanations. For example, Malbim: “six days” in this verse begins on the *second* day of the festival, after we have begun the harvest and are permitted to eat *hadash*, the newly-harvested grain.

⁵ One possibility: the “seven days” of the festival refers not to the eating of *matzah* but to the prohibition of certain kinds of work during *hol hamo’ed*; *B. Hagigah* 18a, stressing the word תשמור.

⁶ “Justify” indicates that the midrash is not always the source of the *halakhah* but often its explanation, linking the received halakhic understandings called *Torah sheb’al peh* to the text of the written Torah.

⁷ Witness the different number of sacrificial bulls offered in the Temple on each day of Sukkot (Numbers 29), while the same number is offered on each day of Pesah (Numbers 28:16-25). This is one of the reasons given for why we do not recite the entire Hallel on the last days of Pesah while we do recite it in its entirety every day of Sukkot; see *B. Arakhin* 10b.

mitzvah for all seven days of Pesah.⁸ R. Menachem Kasher has collected these sources in his excellent *Hagadah Sh'leimah*.⁹ Our purpose here is to study several of the most relevant of them, asking what they might have to teach us about both the observance of Pesah and considerations of halakhic thinking and practice in general.

1. R. Avraham ibn Ezra

The multifaceted scholar and poet (d. ca. 1164) whose Bible commentary stresses the *p'shat*, the literal sense of the text, addresses our issue in two places.

Exodus 12:15

שבעת ימים טעם מצות תאכלו, זכר לאכילתם בצאתכם ממצרים, כי לא צוה שיאכלו מצות רק הנאכלים עם הפסח לפני חצות לילה. רק שבעת ימים צוה לאכול מצות להיות זכר לאשר קרה לכם בצאתכם ממצרים, כי שם כתוב כי לא חמץ. ואלו היו מניחים המצריים שיתמהמהו מעט היו מחמיצין עיסתם, והשבעת ימים בצאתם מצות אכלו עד שטבע פרעה ביום השביעי, כי הענן היה מוליכם יומם ולילה, ולא היו מתעכבים בחנותם עכוב רב. וככה כתוב על הפסח: שבעת ימים תאכל עליו מצות לחם עני (דבר' טז, ג). והנה הזכיר על הפסח שבעת ימים תאכל... מצות - חיוב על דרך הפשט. והעד, למען תזכור את יום צאתך.

“You shall eat *matzot* for seven days,” in remembrance of their flight from Egypt. The Torah did not command that they eat *matzah* only with the Pesah sacrifice before midnight; rather, it commanded that they eat *matzah* for seven days as a reminder of what happened to them when they left Egypt, as the text states: “for (the dough) was not leavened” (Exodus 12:39). Had the Egyptians allowed them to tarry a bit, their dough would have become leavened. The period during which they ate *matzot* stretched from the time they left Egypt to Pharaoh’s drowning in the sea on the seventh day, for the cloud led them day and night and they did not stop for long. And as for the sacrifice, it is written: “for seven days afterwards you shall eat *matzot*, the bread of affliction/poverty” (Deuteronomy 16:3) – an obligation established by the literal sense of the text. The evidence for this comes in that same verse: “so that you will remember the day you left Egypt all the days of your life.”

Exodus 23:15

שבעת ימים תאכל מצות, כמו חג הסוכות תעשה לך שבעת ימים - והנה הוא חיוב, ואין כמוהו ששת ימים תעשה מעשיך, כי אחריו כתוב שתשבות ביום השביעי, ואין ככה שבעת ימים תאכל מצות. ועוד, למה לא כתב שבעת ימים לא תאכל חמץ?

⁸ *Mitzvah* here means מצוה ולא לעיבור, i.e. an action that one ought to take but is not absolutely required to do so; failure to perform that act is not a sin, nor does it invalidate some other action. See, for example, *B. Kiddushin* 41a, מצוה בו יותר מבשלוהו and Rashi *ad loc.*: it’s a *mitzvah* to perform an action personally rather than through an agent, and one receives a greater reward when doing so. But the action is nonetheless valid if performed by an agent.

⁹ M. M. Kasher, *Hagadah Sh'leimah* (Jerusalem: Makhon Torah Sh'leimah, 1967), pp. 159-163. The sources can be divided into two broad categories: 1) passages from classical Rabbinic literature (Talmud, *midrashim*, *targum*) and 2) post-Talmudic authorities. Our interest here is with the latter group, since they argue for a seven-day requirement in the face of the consensus *halakhah* that limits the obligation to the first night of Pesah.

“You shall eat *matzot* for seven days,” has the same sense as “you shall observe the festival of Sukkot for seven days” (Deuteronomy 16:13) – it is an obligation (*hiyuv*). The verse does not carry the sense of “You shall do your work for six days” (Exodus 23:12), which is followed by “you shall rest on the seventh day.”¹⁰ The wording “you shall eat *matzot* for seven days” means something different. Moreover, (if the Torah had not meant that the eating of *matzah* for seven days is a requirement) why did it not say “you shall not eat *ḥametz* for seven days?”¹¹

Ibn Ezra clearly believes that the Torah in its literal sense establishes an obligation to eat *matzah* on all seven days of Pesah.¹² It does so because *matzah* is more than simply an accompaniment to the *korban Pesah*; it comes to remind us of the entire week of the exodus from Egypt until the redemption at the sea. Moreover, since the Torah text makes the positive commandment of *matzah* the functional equivalent of *sukkah*, both should last for seven days. This doesn't necessarily pit Ibn Ezra against the Rabbis; as we've noted, the *p'shat* and the *d'rash* readings of the Torah can and do coexist. But it's a tight and well-reasoned argument.

2. Rambam, *Moreh Han'vuhim* 3:43 (David Kafah translation, 1977)

We don't usually think of Rambam's philosophical treatise as a work of *halakhah*. But just as his great code the *Mishneh Torah* is not “purely” halakhic but addresses matters of belief and doctrine (*emunot v'de'ot*), so does the *Moreh* occasionally offer words of halakhic significance.

אבל אכילת המצה אלו היה יום אחד לא היינו מרגישים אותו ולא עניינו ניכר, כי פעמים רבות אוכל האדם מין אחד מן המאכלים יומיים ושלושה, אבל ייראה עניינו ויתפרסם סיפורו בהתמדת אכילתו מחזור שלם.

On the other hand,¹³ if the eating of *matzah* lasted but one day, we would not take notice of it, and the meaning of that *mitzvah* would not be made clear to us, just as it often happens when a person eats a particular foodstuff for (only) two or three days. However, when we eat it (*matzah*) for the full period (= seven days), we truly come to know its meaning.

Rambam in the *Moreh* defines the *mitzvah* according to its *p'shat* and ignores the *d'rash*. Does this description contradict the codified *halakhah* in the *Mishneh Torah* that we are obligated to eat *matzah* on one night only? As with Ibn Ezra we say: “not necessarily.” Each of the two works pursues its own distinct line of inquiry; each serves its own end, distinct from that of the other. The *Mishneh Torah* is all about the *d'rash*. There, Rambam sets forth the standard observance according to the consensus view of the Talmudic *halakhah*. In the third section of the *Moreh*, by contrast, he seeks a rational explanation (*ta'am*) for the *mitzvot*. Thus, we shouldn't expect uniformity or perfect consistency between the two. Still, it is worthy of note that the *ta'am*

¹⁰ I.e., rest is *permitted* (רשות) though not required on the six days but is obligatory on the seventh day.

¹¹ I.e., had it said this, we would learn that the abstention from *ḥametz* is the *ḥiyub* while the eating of *matzah* is *r'shut*.

¹² See also his *Y'sod Mora, sha'ar* 4: ויש שבעת ימים מצות על דרך הפשט כי הם חייב.

¹³ Rambam has just explained why the festival of Shavuot, unlike Pesah and Sukkot, lasts only one day, namely because the Torah wishes to emphasize the *day* on which Moses received the Torah at Sinai.

Rambam offers for the eating of *matzah* assumes that the *mitzvah* extends through the entire festival. A one-day obligation, therefore, makes no sense. One who reads the *Moreh* can't be faulted for asking the obvious question: why, given this explanation, would a person be satisfied to fulfill the minimal standard and yet miss the "meaning" – the substance – of the *mitzvah*?

3. Responsa R. Asher b. Yehiel (Rosh) 23:3

ששאלת על הנחת תפילין בחול המועד. יש מהגאונים שאמרו שאין להניח תפילין בחול המועד שאין צריך אות שהן עצמן אות שאסור בעשיית מלאכה בדבר שאינו אבד, ועוד שחייב בישיבת סוכה בחג ובפסח חייב באכילת מצה, ולא מסתבר טעמייהו.

You ask whether *t'filin* should be worn on *hol hamo`ed*.¹⁴ Some *ge'onim* rule that *t'filin* should not be worn on *hol hamo`ed* because those days do not require a "sign" (אות; see Deut. 6:8). Indeed, each of those days is a sign in and of itself, given the partial prohibition of work, the obligation to dwell in the *sukkah*, and the obligation to eat *matzah*. But that reasoning is not persuasive.

Rosh goes on to argue that *t'filin* ought to be worn on the intermediate days of the festivals, but significantly, he never challenges the assertion that one is obligated (חייב) to eat *matzah* on each day of Pesah in the same way that one is obligated to dwell in the *sukkah* on each day of Sukkot. This doesn't prove that he agrees with the assertion, since his argument does not require that he disprove it. It's not inconceivable, though, that his silence implies consent;¹⁵ if the idea of a seven-day requirement of *matzah* is obviously mistaken, why let it pass without comment?

4. R. Eliyahu the Ga'on of Vilna (Gra), *Sefer Ma'aseh Rav*,¹⁶ no. 185

Up until now we've been dealing with theory. In the 18th century the Gaon of Vilna, by all accounts one of the preeminent scholars in halakhic history, turned the theory into practice.

"שבעת ימים תאכל מצות" - כל שבעה מצוה ואינו קורא לה רשות אלא לגבי לילה ראשונה שהיא חובה ומצוה לגבי חובה רשות קרי להב. אעפ"כ מצוה מדאורייתא הוא וכן פירשו י"ט א"צ אות פסח במצה סוכות בסוכה. ועוד כמה ראיות והיה מחבב מאד מצות אכילת מצה כל שבעה וביו"ט אחרון היה אוכל סעודה שלישית אף על פי שלא היה אוכל שלש סעודות בשאר י"ט מפני חביבת מצות אכילת מצה שזמנו הולך לו ובמוצאי י"ט היה משתדל לטעום חמץ ... והיה נמנע לאכול לאחר פסח מצה שיוצאין בה ידי חובתו בפסח וכ"ז להיכרא לעשיית המצוה שאין עושין אותה להנאה אלא מפני גזירת הבורא יתעלה שמו:

"Seven days shall you eat *matzah*" means that the *mitzvah* extends to all seven days. The eating of *matzah* after the first night is called *r'shut* (a voluntary act) only because it is an obligation (*hovah*) to do so on the first night, and a "*mitzvah*" is called *r'shut* when compared to a *hovah*. Nonetheless, it is a Toraitic *mitzvah*. As has been explained, "the festival does not require a 'sign' (because it is itself a 'sign'): Pesah with *matzah* and

¹⁴ The subject of a long *mahloket* between Ashkenazim, who traditionally wear *t'filin* on *hol hamo`ed*, and S'fardim (along with some Ashkenazim) who don't, at least in part due to the influence of *kabbalah* and the Zohar. See Yaakov Katz, (1984 מאגנסת: ירושלים) "הלכה וקבלה" חילוקי הדעות ומחלוקות ציבוריות בהשפעת הקבלה, שתיקה כהודאה

¹⁵ *B. Y'vamos* 87b and *Bava Metzi'a* 37b.

¹⁶ *Ma'aseh Rav* is a collection of *minhagim* ascribed to the Gaon by his students.

Sukkot with the *sukkah*.¹⁷ The Gra was especially fond of the *mitzvah* of eating *matzah* all seven days. On the last festival day (*yom tov aḥaron*) he would make a *se'udah sh'lishit* (though he did not do this on other festivals) out of his fondness for the *mitzvah* of *matzah*, the time for which was at an end. He would make the effort to eat *ḥametz* to mark the conclusion of *yom tov*... and after Pesah he would avoid eating *matzah* fit for the seder.¹⁸ He did these things to underscore the fulfillment of the *mitzvah*: that is, one does not (eat *matzah*) for enjoyment (*hana'ah*) but because it is a decree of the Creator.

Hmm... let's think about that: does *anybody* eat *matzah* for “enjoyment?” At any rate, we can't help but point out that the Gaon of Vilna is engaged here in “creative ritual,” precisely the sort of thing for which Orthodox Jews tend to criticize us progressives. Does that make *him* a progressive? Of course not; the label is anachronistic for him, just as it is for R. Avraham ibn Ezra, Rambam, and Rosh. But on this issue, at least, all these authorities display a central tendency of progressive halakhic thought, namely an attitude of critique and resistance to the consensus *halakhah*. By this, we don't suggest that they reject that consensus. None of them disagrees that *matzah* is a *ḥovah* only on the first night of Pesah. Rather, by “critique” we mean that they express a clear dissatisfaction with that consensus, the perception that the codified *halakhah*, while formally binding, is spiritually insufficient. And by “resistance” we mean that they draw upon the resources of the halakhic tradition itself to remedy that insufficiency. In this case, they appeal directly to the Biblical text, finding there a “*mitzvah*” to eat *matzah* every day of Pesah.¹⁹ By way of this *tikkun*²⁰ (amendment or, more precisely, *addition*) to the formal *halakhah*, they create a means by which we may sanctify the last days of Pesah, as we sanctify the days of *ḥol hamo'ed* Sukkot, through a positive ritual observance.

And that, we proudly claim, is an example of progressive *halakhah* at its best.

¹⁷ Here the Gra agrees with those “*ge'onim*” cited by Rosh that the special *מִטְוָה* or “sign” of Pesah is the eating of *matzah*. He therefore doesn't follow Tosafot, *Menaḥot* 36b, s.v. *yatzu*, which holds that the “sign” of Pesah is the prohibition of *ḥametz*. See the commentary *Pe'ulat Sakhir to Ma'aseh Rav ad loc.*: the Gra apparently does not think that a *mitzvat lo ta'aseh* (a prohibition, an abstention from some positive action) can be considered a “sign.” We see once again the desire for a positive ritual expression – and not simply a prohibition or the abstention from some action – to sanctify the festival.

¹⁸ I.e., *matzah* that fulfills the *mitzvah*, which excludes *matzah ashirah* (“egg matzah”).

¹⁹ Ibn Ezra, as we've seen, calls this *mitzvah* a “*ḥiyuv*,” but he doesn't go so far as to require that one recite the blessing *al akhilat matzah* every time one eats *matzah* during the festival.

²⁰ We choose this term with intention. The Orthodox opponents of the early Reform movement called its adherents *m'taknim*, “those who institute amendments/additions/reforms.”