

PESACH SERMON
SHABBAT CHOL-HAMOED
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MAN-O-MANISCHEWITZ

No sermon today, just a story ... a true story. A story of a man who changed the way we celebrate Pesach; a man who had a profound affect on the American Jewish community; a man who may rightfully be called “the Henry Ford of the Jewish people.” I’m not going to tell you his name just yet, but this I can tell you: when you hear his name you are all going to say “Man-o-Manischewitz!”

We Jews have been eating matzah on Pesach for more than 3300 years. But the truth is, the way we made matzah changed over the centuries. Initially, matzah was made by hand and it was soft and thick, resembling pita, made in a mud oven or on hot bricks. To this day, many Sephardic communities still eat soft, thick matzot.

By the 1500’s things were changing. By then, for numerous reasons, the Ashkenazic world started making matzah thin, dry and hard but continued making them by hand. And to this day, I – and many others – continue to eat only the hand made matzot during Pesach, while others use those matzot specifically for the Pesach Seder.

And then came the Industrial Revolution ... and in 1838 a machine was made that rolled dough for matzah. And step by step, all hell broke loose! Because the Industrial Revolution brought more and more people from the shtetl to large, urban centers it was no longer sufficient for there to be small matzah bakeries as they had had in the little towns. Now the need came to bake massive amounts of matzah to meet the growing populations in the cities. And so, a question was asked of the famous Rabbi Shlomo Kluger, who was considered one of the true Torah giants of his generation, whether matzot made by machine were acceptable. Rabbi Kluger never saw one of these machines in action, but based on the way it was described to him, he said it was prohibited. He prohibited the use of the machine matzot on several basis:

- Bits of dough could get stuck in the machine and become chometz.
- The matzot had to be made with special *intent* for Pesach ... something he felt could not be done by machine.
- And besides, using a machine would cause poor people to lose their jobs.

But as things would have it, at about the same time, the same question was asked of another Torah giant, Rabbi Yosef Shaul Natanson. He, after personally watching a trial run of a matzah making machine, said that it was permissible.

And then ... all hell *really* broke loose! Rabbi Kluger published ten letters defending his decision, calling it a “Declaration to the House of Israel.” Rabbi Natanson published twenty

letters defending his, calling it “The Annulment of the Declaration!” Just about every major rabbi in Europe took sides on this dispute.

When this dispute hit Israel, then all hell *really, really, really* broke loose! All the while, here in America, by the late 1800’s there were a number of matzah factories, and in 1886 an immigrant from Prussia to Cincinnati, Ohio started a matzah factory that exists to this day. His name was Dov Behr Manischewitz. And the rest is history!

A shochet by profession, Dov Behr Manischewitz used to love to tinker with gadgets, and he automated the entire matzah-making process; baking the matzot with gas heat and not wood. By 1903 the Manischewitz Company was using three different machines to automate three different aspects of the process. They eventually held more than 50 patents relating to the process and in 1920 they claimed that they were capable of producing an astonishing 1.25 million matzot a year! Today the Manischewitz Company is no longer owned by the family but remains the largest kosher producer. Indeed, a book by a member of his family was written two years ago called: Manischewitz – the Matzah Family, the Making of an American Jewish Icon.

Jonathan Sarna, the distinguished American Jewish historian, points out how revolutionary the machine-made matzot of Mr. Manischewitz were. It changed the course of matzah! First, originally matzah had been round. Now, because of technology and packaging, it became square. Second, originally each matzah was unique and distinctive in terms of shape and texture. Now, every matzah in the box came out looking and tasting the same. And third, whereas matzah was originally locally produced, it now became a national product and then an international one!

But perhaps the most radical change the machine-made matzah brought about has to do with price. Today you can get a box of machine matzah for a little over \$3 a pound ... whereas a pound of hand matzah can come out to be around \$20 a pound. I think it is safe to say that at \$20 a pound, few people would be making matzah brie and matzah balls and matzah latkes and matzah stuffing and matzah kugel and the most important of all, matzah pizza ... to commemorate the exodus of the Jews from Sicily!

But why do I tell you all this today? Because this history of matzah speaks in a most significant way to what we as Jews are experiencing today. Today no one questions the acceptance of machine-made matzah! Every prominent rabbinic certifying group, from the Orthodox Union to the Badatz in Jerusalem, certifies machine-made matzah. And while there are some people who still will only use the hand made matzah at the Seder, there are other Jews – particularly German Jews – who will ONLY use machine-made matzah, feeling that because of the technology involved, the chances of any of it becoming chometz are less likely than of those that are made by hand. The truth of the matter is, many of those who originally opposed the machine-made matzot did so not simply for halachic reasons but for sociologic reasons ... they feared any innovation from the Industrial Revolution because they feared that any instrument of modernity would inevitably lead to assimilation. One opponent, Rav Yitzchak Meir from Gur, wrote: “May Hashem save His nation from those people, messengers of the evil inclination, students of Yeravam ben Nevat who seek to chip away from each mitzvah a little at a time, and their intent is to eradicate it all.”

Although the Industrial Revolution is long over and the debate about machine matzot is long settled, we are living through a new revolution, the technological revolution. And the battle lines have been drawn once again, with rabbis in Israel and America first trying to prohibit the use of cell phones and now of computers. There are ultra-Orthodox schools here in the U.S. which will not admit students whose parents own a computer. As Rabbi Berel Wein, the Jewish

historian puts it, “almost every technological advance and new invention in the long history of civilization has become an issue of Jewish law and halacha as well.” So today’s outcry by the rabbis is nothing new. But I would say that they should know better, because our matzah story reminds us that invariably every battle over a new technological innovation, after a generation or two, became settled with the new technology accepted. Today we not only have kosher food but kosher lamps and kosher ovens and kosher cell phones and kosher microphones as well! I read a story told back in the ‘50’s about the Brisker Rav who was asked a question by one of his students who had just gotten married. The student asked whether he could buy a telephone for his apartment and the Brisker Rav responded that phones were not a necessity but a luxury that he should live without. Is there any Jewish sage today who doesn’t have a phone ... a cell phone? Even more, I just read that in the ultra-Orthodox city of B’nai Brak, right across the street from the most popular synagogue – a synagogue used by 17,000 people daily – there is a large computer store!

Of course there are problems with a computer ... the Internet opens our homes to a lot of things that we don’t want to let in. But let us remember: it also opens up our homes to a lot of things that can uplift us. Yes, there is pornography, but there is also Parshat Ha-shavuah. Yes, there is a lot that is treife – but there’s lots of Torah. Yes, there is a lot that you can order that is worthless, but Amazon will ship you a ten pound box of matzah at a reduced rate! The technological revolution, like the Industrial Revolution, is not a matter of good or bad, it’s a matter of how we use it ... using it for our own good. Mr. Manischewitz showed us how technology can be used for good. Our entire Pesach experience is different because of him ... is *better* because of him. From matzah to telephones to the computer ... to all points in between, the challenge is not the technology, the challenge is on us. “The times, they are a-changing.” In 1990 the Manischewitz Company passed out of family control when it was sold to Kohlber & Co. for \$42.5 million. Since then it has been sold two more times; in 1998, for \$124 million and in 2007 to Harbinger Capital Partners. But with all the changes, the name lives on. Its kosher products have increased and its name still symbolizes kosher food at its best. To which I conclude not by saying “Amen,” but simply “Man-o-Manischewitz!”

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