

Did the Israelites Eat Matzah While They Were Slaves?

By: MITCHELL FIRST*

Is there evidence that the Israelites ate matzah while they were slaves?¹ Three texts must be analyzed to answer this question: 1) the Geonic *ha laḥma anya* statement at the beginning of the Haggadah, 2) a statement by R. Shimon in the *Sifrei* to Deuteronomy, and 3) the *lehem oni* verse at Deuteronomy 3:16. This is the order in which I will proceed.

I. The *Ha Laḥma Anya* Statement in the Haggadah

The beginning of the Haggadah includes the following statement: “*ha laḥma anya di akbalu avbatana be-ara de-Mitzrayim.*” On the simplest level, this statement means that our ancestors ate matzah while they were slaves in Egypt.²

* I would like to thank my former *havruta* in Teaneck, Steve Leichman (now living in Israel for many years), for getting me interested in this topic. I would also like to thank Rabbi Avrohom Lieberman, Rabbi Moshe Schapiro and Chanan Cohen for their various assistance.

¹ They may have made it for themselves, or they may have been fed it by the Egyptians. Both have been suggested.

² See D. Henshke, *Mah Nishtannab?* (2016), p. 238, n. 266. He writes that this is certainly the plain sense of the sentence. Admittedly, the sentence could be a reference to the matzah eaten that night with the sacrifice, or to the matzah eaten the next day. (At the time of the latter, they were still technically in *Mitzrayim*. See Ex. 12:37, Num. 33:5–6, Maharal, *Gevurot Hashem*, chap. 51, and M. Kasher, *Haggadah Shelemah*, p. 5, n. 13.) But if it were a reference to the matzah of these other occasions, the statement would have been phrased differently, e.g., “that they ate with the sacrifice in *Mitzrayim*,” or “that they ate while they were leaving *Mitzrayim*.”

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But what is the source for this statement? The statement is not found anywhere in the Mishnah, Talmud, or Midrash. Almost certainly, it dates only to the Geonic period.³ Since it is not found earlier, it is reasonable to take the position that this statement does not reflect an ancient tradition that our ancestors ate matzah while they were slaves. Most likely, it is merely the author's own understanding of the *lehem oni* phrase at Deuteronomy 16:3,⁴ a phrase that is subject to numerous interpretations, as we will discuss.

II. A Statement by R. Shimon in the *Sifrei*

The following statement is found in the name of R. Shimon⁵ in the *Sifrei* on Deuteronomy 16:3:⁶

Lamah nikra "lehem oni"? Al shem inuy she-nitanu be-Mitzrayim.

Why is [matzah] called *lehem oni*? To recall the oppression we suffered in Egypt.

Henshke does cite some Rishonim who interpret the passage as a reference to the matzah eaten with the sacrifice. See, e.g., *Meyuhas Le-Rashbam (Haggadah Shel Pesah: Torat Hayyim*, p. 13). He suggests that they only gave this interpretation because there is no evidence that the Israelites ate matzah while they were slaves.

There are other versions of *ba lahma anya* that have a text like "that our ancestors ate when leaving the land of Egypt." But most likely these are not the original reading. See Henshke, p. 238. (Maharal defends such a reading. He argues strongly that the Israelites did not eat matzah while they were slaves and that the author of our passage could not have made such a statement.)

³ See S. and Z. Safrai, *Haggadat Hazal* (1998), pp. 109–111 and 205, and Henshke, pp. 238–239. This sentence is not found in the Haggadah of R. Saadiah Gaon (d. 942). See *Siddur R. Saadiah Gaon*, p. 136. It is also not found in the earliest Palestinian Haggadot, which are from the same general period. The fact that it is in Aramaic suggests that its origin was Geonic Babylonia. See Safrai, pp. 110 and 205.

The next section in our Haggadot, which begins כל דכפין, has a separate origin. See Safrai, pp. 111–112, and Henshke, p. 239, n. 271.

⁴ Henshke, p. 238, n. 266. (Of course, the unlikely alternative view is that this statement preserves an old tradition that was also preserved earlier in the statement by R. Shimon that I will discuss next. One work that takes this view is *Lo Kakh Katuv Be-Tanakh*, by Y. Zakovitch and A. Shinan, 2004, p. 94.)

⁵ I am not going to address who this is. Perhaps it is R. Shimon Bar Yoḥai. In general, statements in the Mishnah in the name of "R. Shimon" are by R. Shimon Bar Yoḥai.

⁶ It is sec. 130 in the edition of M. Ish Shalom.

Many understand this cryptic statement as implying that the Israelites ate matzah when they were enslaved.⁷ But those words are not found in the statement. We will revisit this statement in Part III where I suggest another interpretation.

Of course, even if R. Shimon meant that the Israelites ate matzah while they were enslaved, this might just be his individual view. The more important question is what is in Tanakh, which we will now discuss.

III. The Meaning of *Lehem Oni* at Deuteronomy 16:3

The only possible Biblical evidence that the Israelites ate matzah while they were slaves would be an argument based on the reference to matzah as לחם עני at Deuteronomy 16:3. Let us investigate this phrase.

Here is the entire verse: “You should not eat *hametz* with it [=the *pesah* sacrifice]; seven days you should eat *matzot* (=unleavened bread) due to it, *lehem oni*, because in haste you exited from the land of Egypt; in order that you remember the day you left the land of Egypt all the days of your life.”⁸

Here are some suggestions that have been offered for the translation of *lehem oni*:⁹

- Poor bread: i.e., bread that is without leaven or other specific ingredients that make it rise or otherwise improve its texture or flavor, or bread that is of low quality in a general sense.

⁷ See the commentaries on this statement in the *Sifrei* by Netziv and Malbim. See similarly Henshke, p. 238, n. 266, and Zakovitch and Shinan, p. 94. The English edition of the *Sifrei* by J. Neusner (1987) simply translates the statement literally: “It refers to the distress that the Israelites had suffered in Egypt.” But the English edition by M. Jaffee (2016) adds in brackets the words “while eating it.”

The Hebrew edition of the *Sifrei* by L. Finkelstein (1939) has only a brief note on this passage. It is a comment in the name of R. Hananel that I did not understand, but it does not claim that the Israelites ate matzah while enslaved.

⁸ The translation is mine. The word עליו appears twice in this verse. I am giving it two different translations: “with it” and “due to it.” I am following the approach of *Da’at Mikra*.

⁹ There are passages in the Talmud where *halakhot* are derived from the Biblical phrase *lehem oni*. For example, Pes. 36a and 36b, and Ber. 38a and 39b. But the interpretations of *lehem oni* offered in these passages are not plain sense ones. For example, *oni* is treated as if it was vocalized as *ani* (poor person) and laws are derived from that. An alternative view treats עני as related to אבינות (mourning)! Also, the interpretation: *lehem she-onin alav devarim barbeh* is obviously not a plain sense interpretation.

- Bread that is typically eaten by poor people (e.g., due to its ability to be made quickly or because it only requires the common ingredients of flour and water, or because it is filling).
- Bread that is made in the manner of poor people, e.g., without proper equipment.
- Bread of affliction.¹⁰ (This translation can imply that the Israelites ate this bread during their enslavement in Egypt. We will discuss this further below.)

How do we choose between these approaches? When we look at the word *oni* carefully, we realize that it is different from the word *ani*. *Ani* is an adjective that means “poor, afflicted, humble.” But *oni* is a noun. We have the word *oni* (with *holam*), and its equivalent with *hataf kamatz*, many times in Tanakh.¹¹ It always has a meaning like “affliction” or something close to that.¹² This suggests that “affliction” will be its meaning here.¹³

Some of our traditional commentators interpret *lehem oni* as indicating that the Israelites ate matzah while they were slaves. How do they arrive at this conclusion? Following the second approach above, Seforno writes that *lehem oni* refers to the bread that the Israelites ate during their enslavement. Because the taskmasters were constantly rushing them, the Israelites did not have time to let their bread rise.¹⁴

¹⁰ This is the translation of the Jewish Publication Society of America of 1917. Long before this, this was the translation of the King James Version of 1611 (consistent with the ancient Septuagint translation).

The King James Version surprisingly adds the word “even” in its translation: “even the bread of affliction.” This was followed in the 1917 translation. Did the translation “even the bread of affliction” originate with the King James Version or was it found in earlier English translations? What is the reason for that extra word “even”? I leave these questions for others.

Similar to “bread of affliction” is the translation of S.D. Luzzatto in his Italian translation of Deut. 16:3: “*pane di miseria*” = bread of misery. I thank Daniel Klein for the reference.

¹¹ Also, there are many other words in Tanakh constructed around *oni*. For example, *mei-oni* (מעני) and *anyeinu* (אנינו).

¹² See F. Brown, S.R. Driver, and C. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (1906), p.777. One example is *chur oni* (חור עני) at Isa. 48:10: “furnace of affliction.” (The reference is to difficulties the Israelites faced in exile in Babylon.)

¹³ “Oppression” is also a possibility, but this is little different from “affliction.”

¹⁴ Rav S.R. Hirsch agrees with this approach. See his commentary to Ex. 12:8.

Naḥmanides also takes the position that the Israelites ate matzah while slaves. He writes that verse 16:3 indicates there is a double implication in the commandment to eat matzah: it commemorates the matzah the Israelites ate in haste while they were leaving, and it commemorates the matzah they ate while they were slaves. He also cites the *ba laḥma anya* passage in the Haggadah.

How do modern scholars understand the meaning of *leḥem oni* at Deuteronomy 16:3?

A widespread view among modern scholars rejects any connection between Deuteronomy 16:3 and what the Israelites ate as slaves. I am referring now to the interpretation offered in *The JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy* (1996).¹⁵ This work translates *leḥem oni* as “bread of distress.” It explains that matzah was: “primitive, unluxurious fare that one would not normally eat.” It explains that this type of bread was “eaten by the poor or those intentionally deprived, such as prisoners.” It translates the verse as follows: “...for seven days thereafter you shall eat unleavened bread, bread of distress—for you departed from the land of Egypt hurriedly—so that you may remember the day of your departure from the land of Egypt....” I.e., eating this low-quality bread yearly will remind people of the low-quality bread=bread of distress that they had to eat upon leaving Egypt due to their hurried departure.

This translation is adopted in the Conservative movement’s flagship Torah commentary *Etz Hayyim* (2001). This work borrows some of the comments from the above *JPS Torah Commentary*. It then adds: “There is no evidence that the Israelites ate matzah when they were slaves. It commemorates the Exodus, not the enslavement.” *The JPS Torah Commentary* had expressed this view, too.

Da’at Mikra takes a similar approach.¹⁶ It defines *leḥem oni* as the bread of: *aniyut ve-dahakut ve-laḥatz*.¹⁷ It adds that the matzah was called *leḥem oni* “*ki lo ḥametẓ*” It explains that the Israelites ate it due to “*deḥakab shel ba-sba’ah*.”

But I disagree with this *JPS-Etz Hayyim-Da’at Mikra* approach because I think a reference to the enslavement is intended in the phrase *leḥem oni*. *Oni* and its variants almost always refer to “affliction.” Nevertheless, **a reference to affliction does not mean that the Israelites ate matzah when enslaved**. Let us explore this approach further.

¹⁵ Authored by Jeffrey Tigay.

¹⁶ *Da’at Mikra* to Deuteronomy was published in 2001.

¹⁷ The word *aniyut* is, of course, ambiguous. But the two other words shed light on how it is being used here.

Let us look at the comments of Rabbi Dr. J. H. Hertz on לֶחֶם עֲנִי: The translation at the top in this work is always taken from the Jewish Publication Society's 1917 translation. It has "bread of affliction." Rabbi Hertz comments: "So called because the bread was prepared while the people were in a state of stress and hardship, consequent upon their hasty departure from Egypt¹⁸... There is, of course, an obvious association of ideas with servitude in Egypt."

R. Hertz has **not** stated that the Israelites ate matzah while they were slaves in Egypt. But he believes that the עֲנִי in our verse is an "obvious" allusion to the servitude. Almost certainly, what he means is that "bread of affliction" does not have to mean bread that was eaten in the affliction. It can merely mean "bread eaten now to commemorate the past affliction"!

I believe this is the import of Rashi as well: "*lehem she-mazkir et ha-oni she-nitanu be-Mitzrayim.*" If Rashi believed that the Israelites ate matzah while they were slaves, he would have said this.¹⁹

I also believe that this is the import of R. Shimon's statement: *Lamah nikra "lehem oni"?* *Al shem inuy she-nitanu be-Mitzrayim.* The unusual bread merely commemorates the affliction.

To support my point, let us look at the commandment of *maror*. At Exodus 12:8, we are told to eat *merorim* with the *pesah* sacrifice. We are told the same thing at Numbers 9:11 in the case of *pesah sheni* (with slightly different wording). The Torah never gives the reason for the eating of the *merorim*.

At Exodus 1:14 we had been told "*va-ye-mareru et hayeyhem be-avodah kashab.*" Is it merely coincidence that *merorim* are required to be eaten with the sacrifice? There are some who would take this approach.²⁰ But the

¹⁸ Perhaps this is the import of the translation of R. Aryeh Kaplan in *The Living Torah* (1981): "This shall be hardship bread, since you left Egypt in a rush."

¹⁹ I am here disagreeing with many sources that take the position that Rashi is implying that the Israelites ate matzah while enslaved. See, e.g., ArtScroll's edition of Rashi, Henshke, p. 239, n. 273, Tigay, comm. to Deut. 16:3, n. 17, and Zakovitch and Shinan, p. 94.

Everyone agrees that Rashi is basing his comments on R. Shimon's statement in the *Sifrei*. But, as we saw earlier, R. Shimon's statement was ambiguous.

²⁰ See, e.g., *Or Ha-Hayyim* (18th cent.) who explains that the custom of those who eat roast meat is to eat something sharp with it and this stimulates the appetite. A well-known Biblical scholar, Arnold Ehrlich (d. 1919), agreed with this approach. See his *Mikra Ki-Feshuto*. In more modern times, some other scholars agree. See Henshke, p. 226, n. 232. See also the explanation cited centuries earlier by Ibn Ezra in both his long and short commentaries. As to his own view,

more likely approach is that *merorim* are symbolic of the bitterness of the servitude.²¹ (This is what is stated by R. Gamliel in the tenth chapter of Mishnah *Pesahim*.²²) But this does not mean that we ate *merorim* as slaves!

The case of matzah is analogous. Words with the theme of עני (oni) are common in the first few chapters of the book of Exodus. See Exodus 1:11 (ענתו), 1:12 (יענו), 3:7 (עני), 3:17 (עני), and 4:31 (ענים).²³ Eating לחם עני can serve to remind us of the affliction of our ancestors,²⁴ but this does not mean that they ate this type of *lehem* when they were slaves.

Of course, it is possible that matzah was a food staple of the Israelite slaves (whether they made it themselves or whether it was fed to them). But we can only get to this result by speculation or perhaps by archaeology,²⁵ but not by evidence from Biblical verses.

Henshke first suggests (p. 225) that the Biblical *merorim* were instituted in opposition to and as a *tikkun* to the servitude, since they are מטעימה the sacrificial meal. Later (p. 227) he concludes that neither matzah nor *merorim* had any symbolism originally and were just accompaniments to the meat. It was only after the destruction of the Temple, when the sacrifices had ceased, that R. Gamliel gave symbolism to the matzah and *merorim*.

Da'at Mikra mentions the approach of both *Or Ha-Hayyim* and R. Gamliel.

²¹ This is either the only reason we were commanded to eat the *merorim*, or at least a second reason for the commandment.

²² Here is the original text of this passage in the Mishnah (as recorded in the Kaufmann manuscript):

Merorim al she-meireru ha-Mitzrim et hayei avoteinu be-Mitzrayim. (Unlike our present *Haggadot*, there is no verse cited.)

²³ See also Gen. 15:13, Deut. 26:6–7, Isa. 48:10 and Neh. 9:9.

²⁴ A different approach to matzah is taken by Yoel Elitzur in his *Places in the Parasha* (2020). He believes (p. 725) that matzah symbolizes “simplicity, new beginnings, and humility.” He is motivated by several factors. For example, matzah is mentioned at Genesis 19:3 (long before the Exodus) and it is a requirement in certain sacrificial offerings that have nothing to do with Passover. Also, as everyone realizes, the Israelites were commanded to eat matzah with the sacrifice, and also for seven days more, before the reason for matzah offered at 12:39. (He also offers an unusual interpretation of this verse.) He never discusses the meaning of the *lehem oni* phrase in Deuteronomy. (If he would give it the meaning “bread of humility,” this would be difficult, since *oni* has a different meaning than *ani*, as discussed above.)

²⁵ There is much evidence from archaeology about bread and yeast in ancient Egypt. But I am not aware of whether this evidence has grounds for implying what kind of food slaves ate, and, in particular, what slaves ate in those few centuries long ago that are relevant to our inquiry.

As an addendum, I would like to mention a famous story about R. Abraham Ibn Ezra found in the *Orhot Hayyim*, a 13th-century work.²⁶ This source records that R. Yosef Ha-Azovi²⁷ said in the name of R. Abraham Ibn Ezra that he was a captive in India and was fed matzah and not any *hametz* because matzah does not digest quickly and a small amount is sufficient, and that this was what was fed by the Egyptians to the Israelites.²⁸

Here it seems that we have evidence that Ibn Ezra concluded by experience, and perhaps not influenced by any Biblical verses, that the Israelites were fed matzah while they were slaves!

But this entire story can be disputed. This story and Ibn Ezra's conclusion about what the Israelites ate are not found in any of Ibn Ezra's own commentaries. Moreover, it has been argued that perhaps Ibn Ezra never went to India, even though he does often discuss practices of India. (See, for example, his commentaries to Genesis 24:2 and 46:34, Exodus 16:1 and 23:20, and Daniel 1:15.²⁹) His own voluminous writings never mention a trip to India.

On the other hand, another scholar has written that "the poem that [Ibn Ezra] wrote about the game of chess as it is played in India shows very clearly that he was there and saw their ways and customs with his own eyes." So, whether Ibn Ezra actually traveled to India is still unresolved.

Note that the story reported in *Orhot Hayyim* starts with **שהיה שבו**. It has been argued that we are all misinterpreting these two words. They did not mean that Ibn Ezra himself was captive in India but that someone else was captive in India! But the conclusion of the story would still be that Ibn Ezra took the position that the Israelites were fed matzah while slaves, based on the experience of this other. ❧

²⁶ The story is also recorded in the *Abudarham* (early 14th century). It has been widely cited thereafter.

²⁷ He lived about one hundred years after Ibn Ezra died.

²⁸ See *Haggadah shel Pesah: Torat Hayyim*, pp. 15–16, and the notes there.

²⁹ Gen. 24:2: "This practice still exists in India."

Gen. 46:34: "The people of India will not eat or drink anything that comes out of a living and feeling creature to this very day."

Ex. 16:1: "The people of India, who do not accept the concept of creation, begin their week on Wednesday."

Ex. 23:20: "In the land of India there is no need for courts for theft..."

Dan. 1:15: "[Rice] is the food of the people in India, and they have no wheat."