

“Why Matzah?”

By Rabbi David Wolpe

How improbable that the central symbol of the great event in Jewish history is a cracker! Why matzah?

When told to "hurry up," Ralph Waldo Emerson's remarkable aunt and inspiration, Mary Moody Emerson, once responded, "Hurry up is for slaves." Time is the most precious human commodity. If we cannot control our own time, we are not free. While all of us will have obligations, only a slave has no control over his own time. Matzah represents the forced hurrying of the slave.

Our tradition took this symbol of hurry, of slavery, and made the bread of affliction the symbol of Passover freedom.

Israeli scholar Israel Yuval writes, "In the ancient world, the rising and leavening of dough represented the power of civilization, human activity, and interference in nature, while the matzah ... was the symbol of simplicity and primitivism, the bread of the unsettled nomad, the bread of affliction that lasts a long time." The bustle and forced activity of Egypt was bread; the long impoverished but emancipated wandering was matzah.

Pesach is a bracing meditation on time and freedom. In leaving Egypt there was no time to bake bread. The humble symbol of matzah, product of necessity, becomes a stirring symbol of liberation. The fleeing Israelites transformed the "Hurry, slave!" message of matzah into a declaration of freedom for all humanity.