



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

PESACH > First Days

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

April 6-7, 2012

Pesach

**Does Faith Make You
Healthier?**



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

Matzah is the core Passover icon. Indeed, “the Festival of Matzah” is the Jewish name for this holiday.

But what exactly is it about matzah that captures the Passover theme? Why do we eat matzah? Is it just tradition and ritual, commemorating the bread eaten by our ancestors rushing out of Egypt, or does matzah have some actual, tangible benefits?

The mystery of matzah is captured in a powerful, yet mostly unknown statement by the 18th century Chassidic Master, the Alter Rebbe, in which he cites the Zohar: “The matzah of the first evening of Pesach is called the Food of Faith; the matzah of the second evening is called the Food of Healing.”

What is the connection between faith and healing?

And do we Jews really believe in faith healing?

The fascinating response of the Lubavitcher Rebbe to the fatal diagnosis of a doctor, a letter he wrote to the esteemed Torah giant, Rabbi Shlomo Yozef Zevin (author of the classic *Talmudic Encyclopedia*) when he fell ill, and a unique talk he delivered on the subject, all help us uncover the deeper meaning of healing, as well as the deeper meaning of faith.

This sermon defines the key difference between remedial medicine, which only treats symptoms, and preventive medicine, which addresses the root of the problem. And the role that faith (and matzah) plays in both.

DOES FAITH MAKE YOU HEALTHIER?

SURPRISING BENEFITS OF EATING MATZAH

1. Matzah in Braille (Joke)

A Jew took his Passover lunch to eat outside in the park. He sat down on a bench and began eating. Shortly thereafter a blind man came by and sat down next to him.

Wanting to be friendly, the Jew offered a sheet of matzah to the blind man. The blind man accepted the gift, ran his fingers over the matzah for a minute, and exclaimed, "Who wrote this nonsense?"

2. What is Matzah?

Matzah is the core Passover icon. Indeed, "the Festival of Matzah" is the Jewish name for this holiday.

But what exactly is it about matzah that captures the Passover theme? And why do we eat matzah? Is it just tradition and ritual, commemorating the bread eaten by our ancestors, or does matzah have some actual, tangible benefits?

Matzah is defined by our sages in many different and, at times, conflicting ways: "The Bread of Affliction," "The Bread of Poverty," "The Bread of Humility," "The Bread of Instruction," "The Bread of Faith," "The Bread of Healing."

What is the real story?

In the Haggadah, we read the basic reason for eating matzah. While holding the matzah we say:

This matzah that we eat, for what reason [do we eat it]? Because the dough of our fathers did not have time to become leavened before the King of the Kings of Kings, the Holy One, Blessed Be He, revealed Himself to them and redeemed them. Thus it is said: "They

baked matzah-cakes from the dough that they had brought out of Egypt, because it was not leavened; for they had been driven out of Egypt and could not delay, and they had also not prepared any [other] provisions.”¹

But this reason seems so incidental.

According to this explanation, there is nothing inherent in matzah that is connected to Passover. I mean, the only connection is the fact that because the Israelites were rushing to leave Egypt and they had no time to wait, they happened to eat unleavened bread. From this it appears that had they not come out that quickly, they would have eaten regular bread.²

Does that make sense?

Don't we all have a feeling that there must be some deeper secret hidden here?

3. Solving the Matzah Mystery

The mystery of matzah is captured in a powerful, yet mostly unknown and cryptic statement by [the 18th century Chassidic Master, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, better known as] the Alter Rebbe, about the difference between matzah of the first Seder and the second Seder.

The chassidim of the Alter Rebbe were once debating a statement by the *Zohar* that matzah has two names: “Food of Faith” and “Food of Healing.”³ They wanted to know which precedes the other – does faith

¹ Exodus 12:39.

² To take this a step further: Why did they suddenly need to rush so quickly out of Egypt? The Jews were under miserable Egyptian oppression for 210 (!) years. We waited this long, we could wait another few minutes! Now suddenly, after over two centuries, “they were not able to delay” a few more minutes to finish baking some bread to eat?! Why the sudden urgency? Why could God not have a bit of compassion and let the Jews bake and eat bread comfortably, after all these harsh years in exile? And because of this seemingly bizarre rush, we commemorate Pesach with eating Matzah, and we even call the holiday the festival of matzahs!

³ See *Zohar* II 41a; 183b.

bring healing, or does healing lead to faith. After all, after healing from an illness people often say “thank You, God,” demonstrating that healing leads to faith.

After struggling with this question, the chassidim approached the Mittler Rebbe [Rabbi Dovber], the son of the Alter Rebbe, who was a mentor to many, and he told them: “Faith comes first. As my father said: ‘Food of Faith is the [matzah of the] first evening [of Pesach]; Food of Healing is the [matzah of the] second evening.’”

And the Mittler Rebbe went on to explain the difference: When healing brings faith, then clearly there has been illness, which then was healed. When faith brings healing, there was no illness to start with.

Asked the chassidim: Does this also refer to physical illness and healing?

And the Rebbe replied: Both to physical and spiritual. Because, to Jews, matter is not divorced from spirit, since spirit transmits into matter, and matter is transformed into spirit.⁴

4. What is Healing?

This may sound a bit cryptic. But when we give it a bit of thought, the idea is both practical and astonishing.

What is the secret behind the healing process?

The answer depends on which doctor you ask.

The arrogant physician will tell you that he is the supreme healer. In fact many patients think so, too. As George Bernard Shaw put it: “We have not lost faith, but we have transferred it from God to the medical profession.”

⁴Sichas Pesach 5702, p. 94-95. Cited briefly in Hayom Yom 15 Nissan. Haggadah shel Pesach with the Rebbe’s commentary.

The humble physician will tell you: “God is the healer. As the verse says: ‘I am God who heals you.’⁵ God created the body with an immune system and built-in healing processes. Doctors can help facilitate these processes, by eliminating impediments and accessing the body’s healing powers, but it is not they who heal. It is God.”

Even so-called non-believers will say that it is “nature’s” inherent healing process that heals,⁶ not the human doctor, who is as mortal as his patients.

When God created the Angel of Death, the Angel resisted saying that he doesn’t want to be blamed for so much misery in this world. Said God: “Don’t worry, when people die they won’t blame you. They’ll blame cancer, heart attacks, strokes and other diseases ... and their doctors.”

Benjamin Franklin once quipped: God heals, and the doctor takes the fees.

5. Who is the Healer? (Inspirational Story)

In 1987, Reb Asher Sosonkin was diagnosed with a terminal illness. After treatments and many months of suffering, one Friday, this chassid came to see his doctor who told him that he should go home for Shabbat and prepare to meet his Maker. “I can do nothing more for you now.”

Quite shaken up, Reb Asher wrote to the Rebbe, quoting his doctor’s verdict. That Shabbat, in one of his talks analyzing a piece in the Rambam’s Laws of *Treifot* [non-kosher food], the Rebbe discussed the issue of illness and death, noting that the word *treif* (which is derived from the word *teref*) means torn, and refers to an animal that has been mortally wounded in some way.⁷

⁵ Exodus 15:26.

⁶ “Natural forces within us are the true healers of disease,” said Hippocrates.

⁷ See Exodus 22: 30. Talmud, Chulin 3a. See also Leviticus 22:8 and Ezekiel 4:14, 44:31.

“How do we establish, whether a wound or lesion is mortal?” the Rebbe asked, “We humans after all have limited tools in determining with certainty whether a certain condition is terminal or not. The answer is that God in His Torah told us what wounds and lesions are mortal. This is what constitutes the laws of *treifot* – the conditions defined by the Divine Torah that render an animal *treif* or not.”

Then, the Rebbe added the dramatic punch line: “We learn from this a critical lesson in the role of a doctor and health practitioner. Who gave a doctor the power to heal, the permission to heal? God did. As it says in the Torah⁸ ‘Heal shall he heal.’ From here is derived that a physician is allowed to heal (we do not say that since God afflicted the person, it is forbidden to cure him).⁹ But nowhere does it say that a doctor has a right to declare a human incurable.”¹⁰

After Shabbat, the Rebbe instructed his secretary to call Reb Asher’s doctor and give him this message. The doctor was devastated and humbled, realizing how he had overstepped his authority by declaring Reb Asher incurable. He later related that this episode had a radical impact on his attitude and added a new dimension of dignity to his medical practice, teaching him the true role of a health professional, who is entrusted and commanded to be God’s instrument in healing God’s creatures.

It also taught him the power of faith to unleash unimaginable healing resources. And how important it is for the doctor to also have faith, and surely not get in the way of the healing process with his own doubts and, uncalled for, fatal diagnosis.¹¹

⁸ Exodus 21:9.

⁹ Talmud, *Bava Kama* 85a.

¹⁰ The same story is told about the young wife of Rabbi Shmuel of Lubavitch, who had fallen ill, and the doctors were unanimous in their opinion that there was no hope of her recovery. When her father-in-law, the Tzemach Tzedek, was told of the doctors’ verdict, he said: “The Talmud specifically derives from the Torah that ‘a physician is allowed to heal.’ But nowhere has a doctor been given the right to declare a human being incurable.”

¹¹ “The greatest mistake in the treatment of diseases is that there are physicians for the body and physicians for the soul, but the two cannot be separated,” said Plato.

6. The Power of Faith in Healing

Healing is truly a Divine power. It is not man that heals but God. Yet God chose man and commanded and empowered him to serve as God's healing agent in the world. Just as God imbedded healing powers in various substances and techniques, He also endowed humans with the wisdom and skills to study, research and master medicine, and the ability to diagnose, administer and facilitate the healing process.

Since the healing process is a Divine system, built in into our bodies and souls, it stands to reason that faith in God helps elicit it.¹²

Many doctors will attest to this, realizing that faith – faith in God, faith in God's method of healing, faith in God's healers, faith in the power of God to open up new channels of blessings – imbues a human being with the right measure of respect for medicine, while also maintaining the sense of awe. For miracles are always possible.

Faith also instills confidence and hope that healing is possible under all circumstances, even when doctors say that they can do nothing more. Simply put, faith and hope strengthen the immune system, and the will to fight and prevail over any illness. How many instances do we find of doctors marveling at the conquest of illness due to someone's faith and willpower?

This does not mean that faith can guarantee that illness and death will never manifest. After all, the same God that gave life and healing can also choose to take life when the time comes. But that does not, in any way, negate the power of faith in the healing process – faith in God and faith in God's instruments of healing.

¹²This should not be confused with faith healing or other forms of quack medicine. The Torah clearly obligates us to go to a doctor to heal and not just rely on prayer, faith or other religious rituals. In a time of medical need or illness it is a mitzvah to visit a doctor. Because God made it unambiguously clear that He embedded the healing process in nature, defined by rules that humans can learn and master, and serve as "partners" with and instrument of God in bringing healing to the world. At the same time we must never lose sight of the fact that God is the force behind the scenes, and it is He who created the process in the first place, and it is He who gave permission to the healer to heal.

Faith – in God and in God’s medicine – is the key force behind the healing process, even if some call it by another name.¹³ Yet, we can often forget this and replace faith in God with faith in the medical profession, and that is our undoing.¹⁴

7. Preventive Medicine

Now we can appreciate the far-reaching words of the Alter Rebbe and his son, the Mittlerer Rebbe, in explaining the significance of matzah:

The matzah we eat on the first night is “Food of Faith” which is then followed by the matzah on the second night which is “Food of Healing” – because “when faith brings healing, there was no illness to start with.” This is what’s known as preventive healing or preventive medicine.

As we all know, there are two types of medicine: 1) symptomatic/remedial medicine and 2) preventive medicine.

The first treats symptoms. Your hand gets bruised, you get it bandaged. You cut yourself, you stop the bleeding. You have a headache, you take an aspirin. You feel pain in your heart, you take a pill, or, if necessary, you undergo surgery. Every illness has its symptoms, and medicine proscribes its remedies.

¹³ A Rabbi I know shared with me an exchange he had with a doctor friend of his. This particular doctor has dedicated his life to researching and finding a cure for several rare diseases that have to date still not have been solved. The doctor works tirelessly day and night, having dedicated his life to conquering these diseases. Very impressed with the doctor’s relentless commitment, the Rabbi told the doctor that he marvels at his absolute faith in God, believing without a doubt that he can find a cure. To this the doctor replied: “I am sorry to disappoint you, Rabbi. But I don’t believe in God.” “How then are you so sure,” asked the Rabbi, that these diseases even have a cure? Perhaps they are incurable.” Replied the doctor: “I am just sure. I absolutely believe in the healing process, and am certain that we will find a cure.”

The Rabbi began to laugh. “What’s so funny?” asked the doctor. Answered the Rabbi: “I never met a fanatic like you. You have more faith than many believers I know. Your absolute confidence in the healing process is one of the greatest testaments of faith in God that I have ever seen, you simply call it a different name.

¹⁴ See Chronicles II 16:12: “And Asa suffered from a foot ailment in the thirty-ninth year of his reign until his ailment spread upward, and also in his illness, he did not seek the Lord, but the physicians.”

Preventive medicine is of entirely different sort. It addresses the root of an issue, long before it can even become a problem. Good nutrition, consistent exercise, proper sleep, disciplined living habits, and many other factors, can maintain and nurture a strong immune system, which in turn will pre-empt many illnesses.

In 1968, the esteemed Torah giant Rabbi Shlomo Yozef Zevin (author of the classic *Talmudic Encyclopedia*) fell ill. He received a letter from the Rebbe,¹⁵ citing the words of the Tzemech Tzedek,¹⁶ that “no illness should strike you, as it says, “I will not strike you with any of the sicknesses that I brought on Egypt, for I am God who heals you.”¹⁷ The Rebbe went on to explain that there is a type of healing which has a retroactive effect, leaving absolutely no scar or reminder of the initial illness.

Matzah adds a critical element in preventive medicine. The power of faith. Faith in God and in God’s healing process.¹⁸ Armed with such faith we can prevent illness.

¹⁵ The complete original text is in *Igrot Kodesh* vol. 24 p. 336-338. In 1968 the Rebbe sent the same note to the elderly and distinguished Chassid and Mashpiah, Reb Shmuel Levitin, upon falling ill – printed in *Likkutei Sichot* vol. 16 p. 515-516. See also *Sichas Shabbat Parshat Vayikra* 5731.

¹⁶ *Ohr HaTorah* Nach, p. 360.

¹⁷ Exodus 15:26. The healing process is alluded to in the Torah thus: After Moses by command of God threw a certain tree into the bitter water making it drinkable, the Torah says “It was there that [God] taught them survival techniques and methods.” And then Moses continues: “If you obey God and do what is upright in His eyes, carefully heeding all His commandments and keeping all His decrees, then I will not strike you with any of the sicknesses that I brought on Egypt, for I am God who heals you.” And the commentaries explain (Ramban; Bechayei on the verse), that because “I am God who heals you” no illness shall come from the outset.

¹⁸ This also explains how matzah is not incidental to the rushed Exodus from Egypt, and why the Jews rushed in the first place and did not have a few extra minutes to bake and eat their bread. Matzah, as the bread of faith, embodies the faith of the Jewish people in God. As soon as God told them that after all these centuries they could leave Egypt, despite the fact that were exiled for so long, their faith dictated that they leave immediately without even a second delay, and without an plans or provisions, placing their total trust in God. (See Rashi on this verse which describes how the Jews could not wait for the bread to rise because they “could not delay, and they had also not prepared any provisions.”) Indeed, once the time of the redemption came, “the Omnipresent did not keep them [even] as long as the blink of an eye” (Mechilta; Rashi Exodus 12:41).

This is the meaning of the Mittlerer Rebbe's words: "When healing brings faith, then clearly there has been illness, which then was healed. When faith brings healing, there was no illness to start with."

"When healing brings faith" means that we trust mortal medicine men, and that brings us to believe and thank God for being healed. We may heal from illness, but the treatment is a form of remedial medicine, addressing symptoms, not necessarily getting to the core and preventing illness from striking again.

However, "when faith brings healing" - when we begin with the awareness that God runs this world and our lives - illness does not have any power over us. This faith is the ultimate form of preventive medicine.

[As we bite into the matzah at the second Seder, let this thought be ever-present in our minds. And may we bring faith and healing to our ailing world. Amen.]

OPTIONAL ADDENDUM

8. Faith for Atheists

The importance of healing that faith brings is now being recognized as necessary even for ... self-proclaimed atheists!

Consider a recent book, *Religion for Atheists: A Non-Believer's Guide to the Uses of Religion*. You heard that right: *Religion for Atheists*.

In it, the author makes the case that everyone, including so called non-believers, are in need of the strengths that faith brings. And without it, every life is lacking a fundamental need.

Briefly, the author, Alain de Botton, makes the following case:

During the 19th and early 20th centuries, religion lost influence, but the religious impulse lingered on. Some people sought salvation in the secular religions of politics - in communism, fascism and various utopian experiments. Others saw artists, musicians and writers as the modern holy men, who could provide transcendence and meaning, revealing timeless truths for how to live.

These days, argues de Botton, politics and culture have lost their allure and power. Cultural and intellectual institutions are no longer about the salvation. They do not speak to the spiritual and emotional needs of souls. People want to be transformed, he observes, “but the lightning bolts they are waiting for seem never to strike.”

De Botton sees a secular society denuded of high spiritual aspiration and practical moral guidance. Centuries ago, religions gave people advice on how to live with others, how to tolerate other people’s faults, how to assuage anger, endure pain and deal with the petty corruptions of a commercial world. These days, he argues, teachers, artists and philosophers no longer even try to offer such practical wisdom.

“We are fatefully in love with ambiguity, uncritical of the modernist doctrine that great art should have no moral content or desire to change its audience,” he writes.

It wasn’t a loss of faith that brought us to this sorry pass, de Botton argues, it was a loss in understanding about how to transmit wisdom. Religion had a realistic view of human nature – that is, we are subjective and vulnerable, unable to create moral universes on our own. Therefore, we need faith in a God beyond us for guidance and love.

Today’s secular institutions, by contrast, have an absurdly high and unrealistic view of human nature. We are each charged with the task of coming up with our own philosophy and moral laws. We are supposed to have the ability, on our own, to remember the key things we learn and to put these ideas into practice.

As such, many of us would rather live frustrated in the company of the believers than fulfilled in this flatland of the atheists. The atheists know what they don’t believe in, but they don’t seem to know what they *do* believe in.

For the record, de Botton is not calling for a religious revival. What I find most fascinating is his argument that, even from a non-believer’s perspective, it is vital to embrace certain elements of faith and religion.

He is calling on secular institutions to adopt religion's pedagogy, to mimic the rituals, habits and teaching techniques that churches, mosques and synagogues perfected over centuries. For example, religious people were smart enough to combine spirituality and eating, aware that while dining in a group, people tend to be in a convivial, welcoming mood. De Botton believes that secular people should create communal restaurants that mimic the Passover Seder. Atheists should sit at big, communal tables, with guidebooks in front of them, similar to the Jewish Haggadah. The rituals of the meal should direct diners to speak with one another, asking questions of their neighbors like "Whom can you not forgive?" or "What do you fear?"

9. Beyond Reason

So there you have it. Even atheists are in need of the benefits of faith. Because true faith is not simply the absence of reason, the blind crutch and childish naiveté that it is made out to be by skeptics. Real faith is not what precedes reason, but one that follows reason.

After all, it is reason itself that leads you to a door, and tells you that it cannot open the door for you. Reason has led you here. But now you need another tool, another faculty called faith, to open the door and enter.

Take love. Research and reason can check out all the pros and cons of your future mate. But then there comes a point when you must make a choice that is beyond reason, to actually commit to living together with this person the rest of your life.¹⁹

Take any commitment. Any action. With all the rationale in the world, reason must admit that it cannot tell you that there are absolutely no risks in making a commitment to something or someone. Reason alone would dictate that one remain on the fence and keep all options open forever. Therefore certainty – to make a move, to commit to one choice or another – can only come from a supra-rational place, which is informed by reason, but one that is beyond reason. The ultimate

¹⁹"The heart has its reasons that reason knows nothing of," said Blaise Pascal.

knowledge, our sages say, is knowing that you don't know, knowing the unknowable and acting on it.

And such certainty – the absolute certainty that comes from faith – is vital for every person on this earth: believers, agnostics or atheists. It is the single most important ingredient to bringing healing – true preventive medicine, the one that pre-empts so many ailments – to a human being.

10. Passover for Atheists

In truth, we don't really believe that there are atheists. They may just be people who are calling God by another name.

The famous 18th century Chassidic master, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev was well known for his empathy and non-judgmental character. One Passover he invited his neighbor to join him for the Seder. The neighbor declined, saying, "Rebbe, I'm an atheist, I don't believe in God. It would be hypocritical of me to celebrate Passover." Rabbi Levi Yitzchak smiled and replied, "The God that you don't believe in, I don't believe in either."

Before we state whether we believe in God or not, we need to first define the meaning of the word God. Everyone has and is in need of some faith; we may just call it by different names.

But, come Passover, we stop philosophizing and debating. We try to just be kind and giving people, welcoming everyone to our table ... offering everyone a piece of matzah ... allowing everyone to taste and ingest faith and healing, each in his and her own way.

We welcome and join all our sons/children at the Seder – all four types, including the skeptic and even the self-proclaimed atheist.

Even the one that says: "What is this service to you?!" He says "to you," but not to him! By thus excluding himself from the community he has denied that which is fundamental.²⁰

²⁰ Passover Haggada, in the section about the four children.

But we welcome him also, because everyone is in need of the power of faith, no matter what name he calls it.

So as we celebrate Passover, and we open our home for all, invite guests, friends or family or strangers, we bring some faith and healing to our ailing world.

May it always be so. Amen.