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ABSTRACT

**What Matzo can teach us about security**

Are you insecure?

It takes a very secure person to answer that question honestly.

We all have our insecurities. No one is 100% secure in his position 100% of the time. Indeed, some might argue that one of the greatest signs of security is being confident enough to be unsure.

The word “secure” is defined as “feeling safe, stable, and free from fear or anxiety, as in, *everyone needs to have a home and to feel secure and wanted.* The word is rooted in the Latin *cura*, “care”, and the prefix *se-*, meaning “without.” Securus then meaning “carefree,” “without care,” feeling no apprehension.

The more secure something — or someone — is the more natural it —or he or she — is.

But where does our sense of security come from? Or, more aptly, where does feeling insecure come from?

Did you know that classic, traditional Matzo is called Shmura Matzo, which literally means “secure Matzo”?

The secret to security lies in an expedition to a Shmura Matzo wheat field in Upstate New York by one of the world’s premier chefs, Dan Barber.

As he shared in a NY Times op-ed, true security — and flavor — is rooted in tradition, faith, consciousness, and mindfulness.

**SECURE MATZO VS. INSECURE MATZO  
What Matzo can teach us about security**

# If You Have To Say It’s Obvious, It’s Not Obvious

Gut yom tov!

Are you insecure?

It takes a very secure person to answer that question honestly.

We all have our insecurities. No one is 100% secure in his position 100% of the time. Indeed, some might argue that one of the greatest signs of security is being confident enough to be unsure.

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Insisting on calling a thing with a certain name, especially in the world of marketing, often indicates that the thing does not quite live up to its name. The more you have to say something is the less it actually is. It isn’t cool to call yourself “cool”.

The official newspaper of the Communist Party in Russia was called *Pravda*, “truth.” Rest assured very little in that broadsheet was true.

Coca Cola calls itself “the real thing.” Uh, is some syrup, water, and carbonation really reality? Has any seeker, looking for “the real thing” his entire life, stumbled upon a can of Coke, and exclaimed, “At last, I have discovered the real thing!”

A trust fund is a legal entity that holds property or assets on behalf of another. The entire fund exists precisely because there is no “trust.” If we trusted one another we would not need trust funds!

They call financial instruments like stocks, bonds, and derivatives, “securities.” Is there anything less secure than a financial instrument? You call it a “security” because you know it’s fundamentally insecure.

Talking about security, what makes someone, or something, secure?

For our purposes, think of security less in the context of “airport security,” where we are trying to protect ourselves and stay safe, and more in the context of “job security,” where we endeavor to feel at home, without care, fear or apprehension.

1. **Shmura — Secure — Matzo**

Fascinatingly, the classic traditional Matzo is called Shmura Matzo, which literally means “secure” Matzo. While today there are many factory and machine-made Matzot, the classic Matzo as our forefathers carried on their backs was completely handmade and “secured” from beginning to end.

The word *shmura* translates as “watched,” “observed,” or “protected.” It all boils down to Matzo that is secure.

This term is derived from the Torah verse instructing us to “secure” our Matzo:

*ושמרתם את המצות כי בעצם היום הזה הוצאתי את צבאותיכם מארץ מצרים ושמרתם את היום הזה לדורותיכם חוקת עולם*

*And you shall secure the unleavened cakes, for on this very day I have taken your legions out of the land of Egypt, and you shall secure this day throughout your generations, an everlasting statute.[[1]](#footnote-0)*

What exactly is secure Matzo? For that matter, what exactly is insecure Matzo?

1. **The Secure Night**

Last night, the first Seder night, is referred to in the Torah as ליל שמורים, a night of security, based on the verse:

*ליל* שמורים *הוא לה' להוציאם מארץ מצרים הוא הלילה הזה לה'* שמורים *לכל בני ישראל לדורותם*

*It is a night of security for the Lord, to take them out of the land of Egypt; this night is the Lord's, guarding all the children of Israel throughout their generations.[[2]](#footnote-1)*

Once again we come upon security in the context of Pesach. First securing Matzo, now a night of security.

For this secure reason, we open the door during the recitation of *Shefoch Chamoscho* on the Seder night after bentching.[[3]](#footnote-2)

The Talmud[[4]](#footnote-3) states that on the first night of Pesach we are secure and protected from all harmful spirits. It also states[[5]](#footnote-4) that *layl shemurim* should be read as *meshumar*, (as in *yayin hameshumar[[6]](#footnote-5)*) “preserved,” as this night has been “preserved” for the moment of redemption. And just as Israel was redeemed in Nissan, so too will this night be preserved for the final redemption.

We learn from all this that true security comes -- not from man-made institutions and “securities” -- but from G-d’s protection, which was prominently displayed when G-d took the Jewish people out of Egypt, and is recreated Pesach each year, when the night is secure *guarding all the children of Israel throughout their generations.*

And we create a container to this divine security and protection by eating Shmura Matzo, which is called bread of faith:[[7]](#footnote-6) Our secure faith and trust in G-d and His providence and protection of us draws down the ultimate security, providing us with absolute confidence in ourselves and our destiny.

1. **The Most Natural Matzo**

This matzo security is powerfully captured in an unpredictable place: the Op-Ed pages of The New York Times.

Dan Barber is a Jew. He is also one of the world’s most famous, respected, innovative, and revolutionary chefs. The world literally looks to him for culinary magic.

In 2016, Dan Barber wrote an op-ed that was printed in The New York Times one week before Passover. The title of the piece was: **Why Is This Matzo Different From All Other Matzos?**

What Matzo was this world-class chef referring to?

Why, Shmura Matzo of course!

Here is an excerpt of what he wrote:

Several years ago, at a family Seder, I tasted a matzo I actually liked. It was misshapen and lightly burned, distinguishing it from the machine-made matzo of my youth. And this one possessed something that I had never experienced with matzo: It had flavor. What can I say? Up until that moment, the best matzo of my life was not much better than the worst matzo of my life; you could taste the struggle in every bite. For the first time I ate matzo and thought, This is delicious.

In the spirit of the Four Questions, which the youngest child always asks at the Passover Seder, and which begin with: Why is this night different from all other nights? I asked myself, “Why is this matzo different from all other matzos?”

...A visit to the bakery where the matzo was made, in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, allowed me to see how this law plays out on the ground. There were roughly 40 workers, with earlocks and yarmulkes, white shirts and black pants. For each batch of matzo, from the moment the water met flour, the workers frantically mixed, rolled and baked — all within 18 minutes — guaranteeing no fermentation.

The precision was impressive. But the recipe was just a hurried mix of flour and water. Not even a kiss of salt — nothing to explain that bravura taste, apart from the grain itself.

The bakery, I learned, specialized in an elite class of matzo called “shmurah,” meaning “guarded” or “watched,” which Orthodox communities prescribe for the first night of Passover. For shmurah matzo, the guarding against chametz begins not in the bakery but in the field, with rabbis overseeing the grain from harvest through to milling. Maybe, I thought, the matzo owed its flavor to this rabbinical scrutiny.

So several months later, I drove to upstate New York to visit one of the bakery’s suppliers, Klaas Martens, a grain farmer whom, coincidentally, I’ve known for many years. It was early July, and he was waiting to harvest kosher spelt for shmurah matzo. (Spelt isn’t typical matzo material, but it is one of the five biblical grains permitted in Passover tradition.)

Barber learned many lessons from his experience that day, and I encourage you all to read the op-ed for yourselves (see Appendix for full article). But there is one point I want to focus on, a point which I believe sheds light on the heart and soul of Shmura Matzo, and being a truly secure individual. This point answers where our real security comes from and why it must always be cultivated.

And, this incidentally — or providentially! — also answers all of the handmade, hand-baked, home-focused meshugas of Pesach inherited from your bubby.

Barber continues:

...Perhaps more far-reaching, the laws agitate for consciousness. Even my daylong encounter with harvesting spelt showed me the monotony of the chore, as much as the challenge. Growing grain is rote work. Do it long enough and the routine will become desensitizing.

“The requirement for close inspections of the spelt means I’m observing things that would otherwise go unnoticed,” Klaas told me. “I apply it to other crops, not with the same vigilance but with … I don’t want to sound corny, but it’s mindfulness. Mindfulness is a part of all my work now, and it benefits just about everything I grow.”

Shmura Matzo, secure Matzo, is all about awareness, watchfulness, intention, consciousness and mindfulness. It is, literally, being truly observant.

As we started down the last row of the 30-acre field, I watched the rabbi study the spelt left to cut. At the end of this hot, grueling day, he didn’t ease into the last few minutes of the harvest. If anything, he looked closer, examining the spelt so carefully, so faithfully, he might have been reading ancient scrolls.

Each grain in Shmura Matzo has been secured like that of a holy scroll!

I can’t shake that image because of something Klaas told me many years ago: “The history of wheat in a question is ‘How do we grow this and make it easier?’ ”

We’ve been spectacularly successful. After all, wheat built Western civilization. We eat a lot of the stuff — in the United States, more than 130 pounds per person each year. Worldwide, it covers more acreage than any other crop.

The world tries to make things easier. How do we industrialize life. How do we systemize and program our day-to-day regimens. This, inevitably, leads to insecurity. The more industrial we become the less essential we become and the less essential, the more insecure.

Yiddishkeit, Judaism, Pesach, is the exact opposite!

The rabbi, however, was not interested in making wheat easier. And his stone-faced inspection reminded me of what that pursuit has left us with: chemicals, denuded wheat, depleted soils and a host of other problems with our food system.

Everyone has his own standards — for food and faith — but that image of the rabbi gave me hope that the solution for a problem centuries in the making is within reach. Call it a fifth question: Instead of making something easier, why not make it more delicious?

1. **The Secret To Being Secure**

Machine made anything is insecure. It isn’t special, it isn’t indispensable, it isn’t inimitable. The machine made one individual, and it made a trillion individuals exactly the same. Carbon — or in this case, carb — copies.

A human being that feels machine-made is a human being insecure. A human being who feels like the world is trying to industrialize him, to make the process of living easier, to bleach and systemize and streamline his life, is an insecure human being.

Machine made Matzo is the process of trying to make things simpler and easier. Shmura Matzo is the natural process of trying to make life more mindful, more focused, more individual, more secure. Even if it’s much harder work.

A human being that feels machine-made is a human being insecure. A human being that feels handmade by G-d Himself is a human being completely secure. Matzo is about remembering the work, the service, the creation, the sitting out sweating in the sun just to analyze each stalk and grain like a holy scroll, which each and everyone of us is.

We learn security from the Guardian Himself:

הנה לא ינום ולא יישן שומר ישראל

*Behold the Guardian of Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.[[8]](#footnote-7)*

Being a Shomer, a “securer” is never sleeping and never slumbering, never settling for the easy machine-made (Kosher for Passover) cookie-cutter, but always being awake, aware, focused and mindful.

When we know that every nuance, every grain, every stalk, every fleck of flower, every fiber of our being is being watched, preserved, hand-chosen and handmade by the Guardian of Israel, we are the most secure people.

And when we emulate our Guardian, securing and preserving every nuance, grain, stalk, fleck of flower, and fiber of our lives, hand-choosing and hand making every second of every day, then our secure being becomes real and contagious.

Tell me: how could such a secure people ever be afraid?

When we walked out of egypt 3331 years ago, this inherent security was revealed, and thus ליל שמורים. And so is it today.

1. **Conclusion: Secure Matzot, Secure Mitzvot**

Matzo represents all of the Mitzvot. The word “Matzot,” *מצות*, also can be read “Mitzvot.”

Rashi on the words *ושמרתם את המצות* brings a beautiful interpretation from the Midrash Mechilta:

*Rabbi Yoshiah says: Do not read:, אֶת-הַמַצּוֹת, the unleavened cakes, rather אֶת-הַמִצְוֹת, the commandments. Just as we may not permit the Matzot to become leavened, so may we not permit the Mitzvot to become leavened, but if a Mitzvah comes into your hand, perform it immediately.*

The security of Shmura Matzo, of secure human beings on Pesach, will surely travel with us into every Mitzvah we do.

Secure people do not wait for things to ferment. We leave Egypt immediately. Secure people perform Mitzvot with alacrity, preventing any fermentation, any insecurity to creep into our wholly, holy (whole grainy?) secure beings.

And this security will surely lead to the Yayin Hemeshumar, the preserved wine drunk with the coming of the ultimate Redemption right now!

*Shabbat Shalom and Chag Kosher Vesameach* — *Good Shabbos and a Happy and Kosher Passover!*

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**Appendix:** **Why Is This Matzo Different From All Other Matzos?**

*By Dan Barber, chef and co-owner of the Blue Hill and Blue Hill at Stone Barns restaurants and the author of “The Third Plate: Field Notes on the Future of Food.” NY Times Op-Ed, April 15, 2016.*

SEVERAL years ago, at a family Seder, I tasted a matzo I actually liked. It was misshapen and lightly burned, distinguishing it from the machine-made matzo of my youth. And this one possessed something that I had never experienced with matzo: It had flavor. What can I say? Up until that moment, the best matzo of my life was not much better than the worst matzo of my life; you could taste the struggle in every bite. For the first time I ate matzo and thought, This is delicious.

In the spirit of the Four Questions, which the youngest child always asks at the Passover Seder, and which begin with: Why is this night different from all other nights? I asked myself, “Why is this matzo different from all other matzos?”

I’m a chef, so of course I was tempted to credit the baker.

Kosher restrictions for Passover prohibit any leavened grain. According to the Torah, the Jews fled Egypt in such haste that there was no time to allow dough to rise. In remembrance, kosher law mandates that Jews avoid any grain that has come into contact with water and been allowed to ferment and rise — “chametz” in Hebrew.

A visit to the bakery where the matzo was made, in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, allowed me to see how this law plays out on the ground. There were roughly 40 workers, with earlocks and yarmulkes, white shirts and black pants. For each batch of matzo, from the moment the water met flour, the workers frantically mixed, rolled and baked — all within 18 minutes — guaranteeing no fermentation.

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So several months later, I drove to upstate New York to visit one of the bakery’s suppliers, Klaas Martens, a grain farmer whom, coincidentally, I’ve known for many years. It was early July, and he was waiting to harvest kosher spelt for shmurah matzo. (Spelt isn’t typical matzo material, but it is one of the five biblical grains permitted in Passover tradition.)

A heat wave gripped the region. The rabbi who had been overseeing Klaas’s harvest for several years had delayed his arrival until the afternoon. Klaas’s John Deere cap was already drenched in sweat. Harvest days are always stressful, but the shmurah harvest is charged with a particular sense of urgency. Wait too long to cut the wheat, even a few hours, and a rogue rainfall could cause chametz; cut too early and the wheat may not be dry enough for storage.

The previous day, Klaas harvested several acres of wheat in 110-degree heat. Examining the wheat later that night, the rabbi found signs of sprouting (indicating chametz) in a handful of the kernels. He declared the harvest not kosher for Passover. It was a loss of several thousand dollars.

Though frustrated, Klaas told me he agreed with the rabbi’s verdict. After many years of oversight, he had come to respect the rabbi’s expertise.

“He could literally walk the field, tasting the kernels, to get the moisture he wanted, which I’ve come to learn is 13 to 14 percent. He knew how long to wait to get it. And by God, he always nailed it.”

As we waited (and waited) for the rabbi to arrive, I considered a question I had never thought to ask before: Is there an ideal moment to harvest wheat? And can you taste the difference?

First, some facts: Wheat can be mature and still too wet to harvest. At the point that the grain reaches physiological maturity, it can contain 40 percent moisture, making it exquisitely susceptible to chametz and spoilage in storage. Left to ripen on the stalk, the wheat will continue to dry down over the next several days. The sweet spot is below 18 percent moisture — ideally closer to 13 to 14 percent, just what the rabbi was looking for. Below 10 percent, the flour won’t perform as well for baking. But waiting works only if the weather cooperates. As one farmer told me, “Every day you’re in the field longer is more risk you’re taking.”

As a rule, wheat farmers don’t take risks. Which is why in regions like the Northeast, where humidity and rain are a constant threat, wheat is often harvested at between 20 and 30 percent moisture and dried down in large mechanical driers. The driers can be brutal and inexact; some of the wheat may overheat, destroying the delicate wheat germ (a shame, since the natural oils in the germ are what imbue the grain with flavor); some may be damaged by condensation that forms inside the bin. The end result is usually serviceable, but not ideal for baking.

Some farmers dry their wheat by spraying their fields with glyphosate — though few will admit it. Glyphosate, the herbicide found in Roundup, was developed to kill weeds, not crops, but it is still employed as a desiccant to reduce dry-down time and ensure uniform ripening. The practice is alarming to many because the glyphosate is applied late, just before harvest (any later and it would be sprayed on our morning toast), and because last year, the World Health Organization’s International Agency for Research on Cancer classified the herbicide as “probably carcinogenic to humans.” Still, for these farmers, spraying is a better bet than leaving the wheat vulnerable on the stalk.

Klaas had no choice but to leave the wheat on the stalk. As an organic farmer, he couldn’t use a chemical to desiccate the wheat, and it’s highly unlikely the rabbi would have allowed it anyway. And mechanical drying, which he normally employs, was not permitted by the rabbi because of the threat of condensation and the use of an “open flame” — high heat that could potentially damage or denature the grain. (Some rabbis are less strict about these rules.)

“What was remarkable to me is that being constrained by the rules of the rabbi, it forced us to figure out how to better preserve the quality of the grain,” Klaas said.

The more I learned about shmurah laws, the more I wondered about their purpose. They were meant, of course, to protect Passover traditions. But by tying farmers’ hands, did they serve another purpose — to protect the wheat itself?

I reached out to Glenn Roberts, founder of the artisanal grain company Anson Mills, to see what he thought of the restrictions. As he outlined his own field protocols, he could have been mistaken for a rabbi.

Glenn pays a premium for what he calls “field-ripened” wheat, with a residual moisture content of 13 to 15 percent — a narrow window for capturing the “spiciness and deep nuttiness” and “green fresh floral notes” of the grain.

“We don’t allow mechanical driers,” he told me. “Never. It changes the structure of the germ, it kills flavor. This is delicate stuff. Getting it right takes time.”

JUST before 2, the rabbi finally arrived. Bearded and robed in the stifling heat, he ignored pleasantries and raced to taste the spelt. After a quick nod of approval, he sent the combine tractor into action. He stood perched on the ledge just outside the air-conditioned cab, scanning the field ahead.

Halfway around the perimeter, the rabbi raised his hand, signaling the driver to stop. He had spotted wild garlic, which traditionally is not allowed in matzo. The driver avoided the offending patch, ditching the spelt around it.

Klaas told me that for many years, the rabbi saw so much wild garlic that he was forced to walk alongside the combine, slowing it down considerably. At first Klaas wondered why wild garlic wouldn’t be kosher. Then he turned to what is, for him, a more practical question: Why was the wild garlic there at all? He came to believe that the wild garlic was a sign that his soil was “thirsty for sulfur.”

In the years since then, Klaas has grown rotations of buckwheat and mustard, which, he found, helped to replenish sulfur in the soil and reduce the garlic in his fields. “The rabbi knew more about farming than me,” Klaas said. “I can tell you that the spelt ever since has been a heck of a lot tastier.”

Glenn agreed. When I mentioned the offending weed, he told me that wild garlic would have made my matzo spicy and bitter.

Convinced that the matzo I’d tasted must be proof not just of a higher understanding of agriculture but also of a higher understanding of deliciousness, I asked the rabbi if he believed that any of the kosher laws ended up producing better-tasting food.

“No. Absolutely not,” he said. “It’s just kosher law.”

How do you argue with a rabbi? Consult another rabbi. I called Rabbi David Woznica, who had shepherded me through years of high-holiday observance, and asked the same question.

“No,” he told me. “I doubt it’s the primary thinking behind it. We don’t know the primary thinking behind it. And, truth be told, that is less important to me. I think the ultimate reason to observe kosher law is because God said so. When we say that the purpose of the law is to do X, Y and Z, then we’ve removed the holiness of God in that law.”

Was I getting caught up in my own mishegas? I sought out other rabbis and scholars on kosher law. No one, not even a Jewish grandmother, would connect kosher to flavor. (One person pointed out the opposite: Passover is about remembering suffering; the matzo is supposed to be flavorless.) Some saw kosher law as a means of defining Jewish identity, while others pointed me to the medieval physician Maimonides, who stressed the health benefits of the dietary restrictions.

People’s demand to know more about what’s in their food has recently brought this thinking into the mainstream. Kosher-certified meats have become popular, not for religious reasons, but because the strict rules regarding slaughter are seen as safer and healthier than factory farming, especially when it comes to animals, where there’s a lot at stake.

There is a lot at stake with wheat, too. As the rabbi and I rounded the field, it became clear to me that, at the very least, the shmurah tradition acted as a kind of checklist, a monitoring process steeped in faith. In protecting the crop from threats such as weeds, sprouting and fungal damage, how could it not have verified quality work in the field?

But even this was problematic for the rabbi at Klaas’s farm, who answered my question with a question: If kosher rules are so important, he asked, why apply these laws to only one harvest? Why not follow them every day?

Every day? It sounded worse than daily Hebrew school. Impossible, I thought, which was undoubtedly the rabbi’s point.

But also unnecessary. I was beginning to see how the annual shmurah harvest improved Klaas’s farming for the rest of the year. It encouraged him to diversify crops, for instance, ridding his fields of weeds and improving the soil for everything else he grew.

PERHAPS more far-reaching, the laws agitate for consciousness. Even my daylong encounter with harvesting spelt showed me the monotony of the chore, as much as the challenge. Growing grain is rote work. Do it long enough and the routine will become desensitizing.

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Everyone has his own standards — for food and faith — but that image of the rabbi gave me hope that the solution for a problem centuries in the making is within reach. Call it a fifth question: Instead of making something easier, why not make it more delicious? There’s room at the table for that.[[9]](#footnote-8)

*A version of this article appears in print on April 17, 2016, on Page SR1 of the New York edition with the headline: This Passover, Faith Meets Flavor.*

1. Exodus 12:17. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. Exodus 12:42. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. Ramo Orach Chaim 480:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. Pesachim 109b. Rosh Hashana 11b. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. Ibid; Mechilta ad loc. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. Berachot 34b. Sanhedrin 99a. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. Zohar II 183b. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
8. Psalms 121:4. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
9. [Why Is This Matzo Different From All Other Matzos?](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/17/opinion/sunday/why-is-this-matzo-different-from-all-other-matzos.html) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)