

Escaping the Box: 18 Minutes to Passover Freedom

By Edmon J. Rodman

Los Angeles (JTA) — In every generation, the Haggadah tells us, the wise, the simple, the non-askers, and even the baddies are obligated to see themselves as though they themselves actually had come out from Egypt. Unfortunately, the closest many of us come to this ideal is a stroll through the Passover aisle of our neighborhood supermarket.

Why does Passover have to come in a neatly packaged box with easy bake instructions?

This Passover, to heat up and personalize my leaving from Egypt, I decided to forego the usual rectangular shrink wrapped packages of the holiday's mainstay, matzah. If our ancestors could prepare for their journey in one night by baking an unleavened quick bread, so could I.

In my best Mah Nishtanah singsong I chanted, "How hard could it be to bake homemade matzah?"

With only a teaspoon full of baking experience, I consulted Claudia Roden's authoritative "The Book of Jewish Food," which assured me that Jewish people once "made unleavened bread at home." According to Rodin, all I needed was some "special hard wheat bread flour," spring water, an oven, and a fork to poke holes in the rolled-out dough.

Problems rose immediately: The flour is harder to find than any afikomen. Many observant Jews will have nothing less than shmurah flour for their matzah, which is made from wheat that has been guarded from the time it was taken to the mill to ensure that it has not come in contact with fermentation-causing moisture.

Searching for shmurah flour, I called a kosher market where I shop.

"Don't have it," said David, one of the owners, adding, "And I don't think it's available anywhere commercially."

Next I tried a local Chabad-Lubavitch rabbi, Mendy Cunin.

"I can help arrange a trip to Crown Heights, where there is a matzah bakery," he suggested.

That meant traveling across the country to Brooklyn, NY. I was in a rush, I explained.

Unfazed, Rabbi Cunin suggested that as I proceeded, I should see the "humility of the matzah."

"It's unlike the egotism of the challah, which is mostly air," he said. "With matzah, what you see is what you get."

A Conservative rabbi with whom I consulted had another opinion, believing that I could simply use kosher flour. She suggested that I was covered for Passover use under the principle of "batel b'shishim," a loophole which says that if a forbidden ingredient like chametz is less than one-sixtieth of the whole, then the product is still OK.

Still, if you choose to try this at home and the origin of your flour is important, please consult a reli-

gious authority; rabbis do differ.

I prepared my exodus from the box with a bag of kosher whole wheat flour and a bottle of spring water. I cranked up the oven as high as it would go, to 550 degrees. While waiting for the oven to reach the desired temperature, I removed my watch and laid it on the kitchen table; I would need it.

Someone long ago determined that the matzah-baking process from the time you add water to flour until you take the unleavened bread from the oven could not take more than 18 minutes.

Longer than that and the mixture could rise and thus be leavened.

As I measured out the ingredients, three parts flour to one part water, it dawned on me that in addition to becoming a baker, I was now a game-show contestant, too. As I readied the mixing bowls and measuring cups, I imagined a show called "Unleaven Heaven" or "18 Minutes to Win It."

Round 1: I added water to flour, mixed it together with my hands, kneaded the sticky ball for a minute and slapped it down. With a rolling pin I flattened and spread the dough. I carefully poked holes with a fork. But when it came time to lift the taco-sized round, the whole thing wouldn't budge. My exodus was stuck.

Round 2: I checked the instructions; I needed to knead longer. As I did, I could feel the dough becoming less sticky in my hands. For the bread made in haste the night before the departure from Egypt, patience was an unlisted ingredient. I flipped the easily freed round into the oven and returned to rolling out another. But why did the kitchen smell like burning toast? I opened the oven door to matzah flambe. Two of the wonders of the Haggadah were happening right in my kitchen: fire and pillars of smoke.

Round 3: The fork wasn't working; to bake more crisply, the dough needed more holes. Veterans of matzah baking use a kitchen tool called a docker, a hand roller with spikes. I thought about buying one. What would Moses do? Didn't liberation call for taking freedom into your own hands? So with three forks, some duct tape and a piece of cardboard, I devised a "forkler." I mixed, kneaded and rolled. I forkled. Flipping the round into the oven with plenty of time to spare, this time I watched, guarding my freedom carefully. Still warm out of the oven, I admired my work as I ate it. It was one part haste, one part invention, and one part humility, but all parts with meaning baked in. And if it tasted like a chewier cardboard, well, it was my cardboard.

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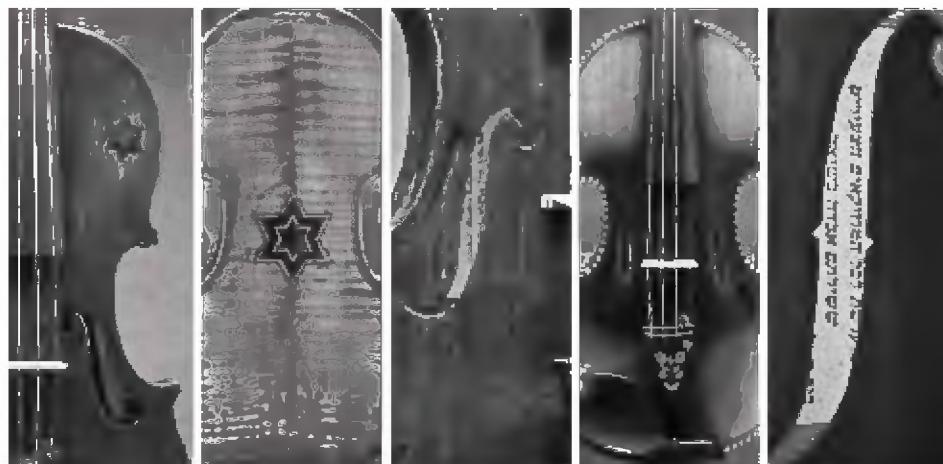
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