

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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BH

WOMEN PLAY A ROLE IN MATSAH PRODUCTION

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The Mishnah and Gemara make it clear that baking is the territory of women year-round, whether it be leavened or unleavened bread. But now we come across something we might call a "Martha Stewart ethic" in the rabbinic world. Women wanted to decorate the matsah:

One can fulfill their obligation to eat matsah with combed bread whether decorated or not. (This is matsah which is decorated, a food of the wealthy.) Even though they said: People do not make decorated combed bread on Passover.

It was taught: Rabbi Yehudah said: Baitos ben Zonin asked Rabban Gamliel and the sages in Yavneh, "Is it permitted to make decorated combed bread on Passover?" They said to him: It is forbidden because a woman lingers over them and they become leavened. He said to them: If thus, why not let them make it in a mold (which would allow them to decorate the loaf quickly)? They said to him: We cannot permit it for people would say: All combed breads are prohibited but the combed breads of Baitos ben Zonin are permitted. (Y. Pesachim 2:4)

The sages don't trust women to heed the time limits on how long they may process the dough before it begins to rise. To the rescue appears Baitos ben Zonin. He was a wealthy resident of Lydda who frequently hosted the sages. It was at this man's house that Rabban Gamliel had his seder that lasted until dawn (T. Pesachim 10:12).

He also participated in halachic discussions, as he does here. And, not surprisingly, he sides with the wealthy who'd like to eat this fancier matsah and his mother, wife and daughters, who would be making it. He suggests a technological remedy to the problem: if the dough is pressed into a mold as soon as it reaches the dough state, it can be baked immediately and there would be no problem. His solution is ruled out, though, because he'd then confuse people because his decorated matsah would be kosher when everyone else's would be invalid.

Discussion Questions:

1. Do you see any parallels between the strictures of kosher on Pesach today and what the sages did to Baitos ben Zonin? For example, peanut oil used to be considered kosher for Passover but now it has been classified as unusable for Pesach. Why do things get stricter and stricter instead of allowing for creativity, as Baitos' molds would do?
2. Women are clearly the bakers of bread and hallah (M./T./Y. Pesachim 3:4) and it is something they do

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communally. It seems to me that the sages have blind spot regarding the dynamics that would develop among women in this situation. Can you imagine what they might be? Wouldn't the women have their own "halachah" about the correct way to bake?

Chag sameiach!