

Putting Bread On Egypt's Tables

BY ROBERT E. SEGAL

History indulges in whimsy. Consider what was going on in Egypt a few weeks before Passover. From Cairo came word that there was a shortage of unleavened bread.

Apparently, it was not because the Egyptians, now friendly with Israel, were unaware of the role played by unleavened bread when the hardships imposed upon the people of the Book by Ramses II helped inspire Moses to lead the most famous exodus known to man. There must be some folks dwelling along the Nile who have read

"And a mixed multitude went up with them; and flocks and herds, even very much cattle. And they baked unleavened cakes of the dough which they brought forth out of Egypt, for it was not leavened; because they were thrust out of Egypt, and could not tarry, neither had they prepared for themselves any victuals."

Old Pharaoh is said to have had mixed feelings about the Jews' hasty departure from

Egypt. They were not all that assimilable, it is true; yet where else could he find outstanding laborers non-unionized and working for pay way below minimum? But how much could Pharaoh really have known about unleavened bread? The Jews were to become the experts in that field.

"And the Egyptians were urgent upon the people, that they might send them out of the land in haste...And the people took their dough before it was leavened, their kneadingtroughs being bound up in their clothes upon their shoulders."

"With our new friend, President Sadat, it's a different story. This modern, down-to-earth ruler of Egypt, this peacemaker, is well aware of the fact that the unleavened bread shortage in Cairo is rooted in economics and has nothing to do with driving out Jews. (Actually, the welcome sign is out for Jews in Cairo now. El Al flies you there. Israel has an accredited ambassador there. You can visit, stay a good while, take pictures and...after an intermission

of 3500 years or so --- boast that you're back and stopping at the best hotel.)


What's with unleavened bread in Egypt then? Writing for the New York Times out of Cairo, Christopher S. Wren has put it this way: claiming they were trapped between rising wholesale costs and fixed retail prices, the Egyptian bakers started to divert the cheaper flour after the cost of pastry flour was doubled. Inflation again; the price was inclined to rise faster than the yeast or a yeast substitute.

People got in bread lines. The government threatened to take over those bakeries helping to create a bread shortage. And the crisis seemed to dissipate.

This brings us back to the current Passover season and a new appreciation of unleavened bread. Thousands once more will place high in their thoughts the Jews of Russia. The matzoh of hope for an increased exodus for Jews from that land of mystery will be set in honored place as a symbol of the indestructible link between Jews in the United States and other lands and the hemmed-in Jews of Russia.

Meanwhile, Israeli and Egyptian negotiators report that they have reached "the heart of the matter" in current talks on Palestinian autonomy. An imaginative chairman might even suggest that leaders of these two nations, now on a plateau of peace, break matzoh together. Bread continues the staff of life; the matzoh continues the staff of hope.

A Happy Passover



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