

שאר וחמץ

אבנר רמו

In the Book of Leviticus we find the term: **חלת לחם חמץ** - “cakes of leavened bread” (Lev 7:13).

The word **חמץ** (*khamets*) appears in eleven biblical verses (most of them in the Books of Exodus and Leviticus), and was translated to Greek (and English) as “leaven” a word that means “to rise.” Yet in the Hebrew language the same word, when pronounced as “*khomets*” means “vinegar” (Num 6:3; Ps 69:22; Pro 25:20). It is therefore possible that the **לחם חמץ** - “leavened bread” had a sour taste, not unlike the “sour bread” which is known since antiquity. There is evidence that for many years this was the main type of bread.



The traditional method of preparing “sour bread” was by mixing flour with a fixed amount of water, kneading the mixture to dough, and then adding a component that will cause the dough to rise, then kneading the dough somewhat more, and letting it rise before baking it in an oven.

Since antiquity the major raising agent was the sour dough left over from the previous day. It was (naturally) contaminated with yeasts of the *Saccharomyces* family, and various species of *Lactobacillus* bacteria. Once added to the fresh dough a fermentation process started, with the consumption of some of the carbohydrates of the flour by the yeasts, that turn it to CO₂ gas that is entrapped as bubbles by the flour protein - gluten. The *Lactobacilli* also consume some of these carbohydrates and turn them to lactic acid which will give the bread a sour taste.



A depiction of the royal bakery from an engraving in the tomb of Ramesses III (1186-1155 BC) in the valley of the Kings.

In the Book of Hosea we read: **כמו תנור, בערה מאפה; ישבות מעיר, מלוש בצק עד-חמצתו.** - “as an oven heated by the baker, who ceases to stir from the kneading of the dough until it be leavened” (Hos 7:4).

If the English translation here is correct then it appears that this verse tells us that after preparing the dough, bakers gave it time (to rise as the result of the fermentation process?) before baking it to bread.

In the Book of Exodus we read:

ושרץ היאר, צפרדעים, ועלו ובאו בביתך, ובחדר משכבך ועל-מטתך; ובבית עבדיך ובעמך, ובתנורֶיך ובמשארותיך.

“And the river shall swarm with frogs, which shall go up and come into your house, and into your bed-chamber, and upon your bed, and into the house of your servants, and upon your people, and into your ovens, and into your kneading-troughs” (Ex 7:28).

The understanding of the Greek (and English) translators of **משארותיך** (*misharothicha*), a word from the root **שאר** (*shar*) meaning “remain”, was that it related to dough. This suggests the possibility that **משארותיך** (*misharothicha*) were the places or containers where the dough was left to rise. Alternatively they were the remaining dough that was kept from the previous day.

We also read in the Book of Exodus:

וישא העם את-בצקו, טרם יחמץ; משארתם צרת בשמלתם, על-שכמם.

“And the people took their dough before it was leavened, their kneading-troughs being bound up in their clothes upon their shoulders” (Ex 12:34).

Here again it is possible that **משארתם** means: “the remaining dough that was kept from the previous day.” It seems that the Israelites were planning to mix later their dough with their rising agent prior to backing it to bread.

We read that sometime later:

ויאפו את-הבצק אשר הוציאו ממצרים, עגת מצות-כי לא חמץ: כי-גרשו ממצרים, ולא יכלו להתמהמה, וגם-צדה לא-עשו להם.

“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 victual” (Ex 12:39).

It seems that the plan of the Israelites failed. It is possible that the desert heat destroyed the yeasts that were in the old dough that they brought with them, and therefore their new dough did not rise and they had to bake it unleavened.

To commemorate the day in which the Israelites left Egypt a holyday was established:

שמור את-חדש האביב, ועשית פסח ליהוה אלהיך: כי בחדש האביב הוציאך יהוה אלהיך ממצרים-לילה.

וזבחת פסח ליהוה אלהיך צאן ובקר, במקום אשר-יבחר יהוה לשכן שמו שם. לא-תאכל עליו חמץ, שבעת ימים תאכל-עליו מצות לחם עני: כי בחפזון יצאת מארץ מצרים-למען תזכר את-יום צאתך מארץ מצרים כל ימי חיידך. ולא-יראה לך שאר בכל-גבלך שבעת ימים; ולא-ילין מן-הבשר אשר תזבח בערב ביום הראשון-לבקר.

“Observe the month of Abib, and keep the passover to *YHWH* your God; for in the month of Abib *YHWH* your God brought you forth out of Egypt by night.

And you shall sacrifice the passover-offering to *YHWH* your God, of the flock and the herd, in the place which *YHWH* shall choose to cause His name to dwell there.

You shall eat no leavened bread with it; seven days shall you eat unleavened bread therewith, even the bread of affliction; for in haste did you come forth out of the land of Egypt; that you may remember the day when you came forth out of the land of Egypt all the days of your life.

And there shall be no leaven seen with you in all your borders seven days; neither shall any of the flesh, which you sacrifice the first day at evening, remain all night until the morning” (Deu 16:1-4; see also: Ex 12:15, 19; 13:7; Lev 2:11).

We should notice that here two Hebrew words were translated to Greek (and English as “leaven.” As indicated above, the first one, **חמץ** (*khamets*) could actually mean “sour bread.” However, the second one is **שאר** (*seor*; as pronounced using the Massoretic vowel dot system). There is no apparent reason to employ here two Hebrew words that have the same meaning. However, we suggest that here **שאר** should be read as “*sheer*” meaning “a remaining” - the dough that remained from the previous day, to be used as a raising agent for the fresh dough so that it could rise (and become sour). To prevent the temptation of using this “raising agent” it was declared that in these seven days **שאר** (*sheer*) “shall not be seen with you in all your borders.”

The similarity in sound between **שאר** (*sheer*) and “sour” is most likely just a linguistic coincidence.