

**How Matzah Became Square:
Manischewitz and the Development
of Machine-Made Matzah
in the United States**

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“The History of Matzah” calls to mind the monumental composition by artist Larry Rivers recounting thousands of years of Jewish history laid out against the background of the Passover matzah. To Rivers, the unleavened bread eaten on Passover seemed like the perfect canvas for his “Story of the Jews.” Matzah to him was not an object of Jewish history but rather a metaphor for it.¹

Rivers might have been surprised to learn that matzah itself possesses a fascinating history, particularly in the modern era when, like the Jewish people, it underwent monumental changes brought about by new inventions, new visions, and migration to new lands. These changes transformed the character and manufacturing of matzah, as well as its shape, texture and taste. They also set off a fierce and revealing debate among Europe’s greatest rabbis that, in some respects, remains unresolved to this day.

This paper focuses on a little-known American chapter in the long history of matzah. It recounts the role of the Manischewitz company in transforming both the process of matzah-making and the character of matzah, and it points to the role played by rabbis and advertisers in legitimating this transformation. At a deeper level, it suggests that even “timeless rituals” are shaped by history’s currents. The transformation of matzah, we shall see, reveals much about transformations within Judaism itself.

The Manischewitzes Come to America

Sometime about 1886, Behr Manischewitz (he sometimes spelled it Ber and was often known as Dov Behr) emigrated to Cincinnati, Ohio from the city of Memel, then under Prussian rule.² Memel was a relatively new Jewish community – Jews had only received permission to settle there in the early 19th century – and most Memel Jews, including the Manischewitzes, were immigrants from Russia and Poland; Behr himself was born in Salant.³ During Behr Manischewitz’s youth, Memel served as the home of Rabbi Israel Salanter (who lived there from 1860-1879), and according to family tradition, Behr was one of his “best-loved pupils... and was so highly regarded for his learning and devotion that the Gaon of Salant had designated Rabbi Dov Ber as his personal *Shochet*.”⁴ Various elements of Manischewitz’s later life reflected the Mussar movement’s influence.

We do not know precisely why Behr, his wife Nesha Rose (sometimes known in America as “Natalie”), and their three very young children, left Memel for the United States. One source claims that Cincinnati Jews from

Salant, Lithuania, landsmen of Behr's father, Yechiel Michael Manischewitz, needed a *shohet*, knew that Behr was a certified and respected kosher slaughterer, and paid to bring him and his family over to serve them. Rabbi Elias Hillkowitz from Salant was a rabbi in Cincinnati at that time, and was a relative of Manischewitz, so this is plausible. Another possibility is that Behr Manischewitz emigrated to the United States in response to the 1886 Prussian expulsion of "Russians" (i.e., Jews) from Memel which, in turn, came in reprisal for Russia's expulsion of Prussians from Kovno.⁵

The Changing World of Matzah

Whatever the case, in 1888, after several years as a *shohet ubodek* and part-time peddler, Manischewitz opened a matzah factory in Cincinnati. This was a common profession for Jewish immigrants, especially those trained in *shehitah*, for matzah too was a Jewish food strictly regulated by Jewish law and requiring supervision. Moreover, demand for matzah was rising steadily in the United States, keeping pace with the growth of America's Jewish population, and the industry as a whole was in the midst of a great transformation. Through the mid-19th century, most matzah had been baked by synagogues which either maintained special ovens of their own for this purpose, or (as happened in New York) contracted with commercial bakers whom they supervised. With the collapse of the synagogue community and the subsequent proliferation of synagogues in all major American Jewish communities, the now functionally delimited synagogues spun off many of their old communal functions (including responsibility for communal welfare, the *mikvah*, and kosher meat), and it was at this time, at mid-century, that independent matzah bakers developed.⁶

The *kashrut* of the matzah made by these new independent bakers became a matter of considerable Jewish debate. In Cincinnati, in 1862, for example, Orthodox Jews published a public notice warning that a matzah baker named Mr. Simon "in no wise conducts himself in accordance with the requirements of Jewish law." The notice declared his matzah "*chomets*...no better than any other bread bought of any baker." New York's *Jewish Messenger* likewise expressed concern in 1863 over the lack of rabbinic supervision over private matzah bakers. Jews who came from stringent European backgrounds and were used to matzah made from wheat that had been continually "watched" since harvesting to prevent contact with water found the state of American-made matzah particularly disturbing. New York's Rabbi

Moses Weinberger, a native of Hungary, deplored the fact that as late as the 1880s “most New York Jews used matsos made from ordinary market-quality flour,” rather than “watched flour.”⁷ Given this background, it is easy to understand why an Orthodox Jew like Behr Manischewitz thought to enter the matzah business himself (so eventually did Rabbi Weinberger). Since demand was growing and local Lithuanian Jews trusted him to maintain the highest standards of *kashrut*, the business seemed to have substantial upside potential.

At the time that Manischewitz entered the matzah business, the industry was in a state of considerable flux. Much of the world’s matzah was still

made totally by hand. The process, which according to the later authorities must be completed within 18 minutes,⁸ had been refined over many centuries and was characterized by a careful division of labor that is still found in hand-made *shmurah matzah* bakeries today. One person, usually an apprentice, measured out the flour. Another worker poured cold water into the batter. Then the mixture underwent a multi-stage process of kneading and rolling, usually performed by women. Next, the dough was scored or perforated, placed on a rolling pin or a long pole, baked (usually by a man) in a very hot oven, and sent off to be packed. Any dough not mixed, baked, and out of the oven within 18 minutes was, of course, discarded. All the rolling pins and poles were then carefully sanded and wiped. The paper on the tables was changed. The workers washed their hands to get rid of any remaining dough. And the process started all over again. This is roughly how traditional matzah baking worked and still works. By Manischewitz’s day it had become a highly gendered process – men and women had different roles – and it was divided into a series of well-defined sequential steps.⁹

In the 19th century, with the rise of industrialization, processes like this began to be mechanized, and in 1838 an Alsatian Jew named Isaac Singer



Behr and Neshah (Natalie) Manischewitz early in the twentieth century.
Courtesy of the Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives.

produced the first known machine for rolling matzah dough. Although this is often called a matzah-making machine, the machine actually only covered one part of the process—rolling—not the equally critical and very labor-intensive process of kneading the dough. Singer's machine, and variants of it, won approval from various rabbis and quickly spread into France, Germany, England, Hungary and the United States (where it was discussed in Jewish newspapers as early as 1850).¹⁰ The machine changed and shortened the process of matzah baking, and also deprived many poor women of their meager livelihoods. At the same time, as machines are wont to do, it increased the supply of matzah, which was critical given the rapid growth of the world Jewish population in the 19th century, and it also led to a reduction in the price of matzah, since fewer hands were now needed to produce it.¹¹

The Controversy Over Machine-Made Matzah in Europe

Subsequently, the matzah machine became embroiled in a sharp and very significant *halakhic* controversy. The dispute was initiated in 1859 with the publication of an “announcement to the House of Israel” (*Moda'ah le-Beit Yisrael*) by Rabbi Solomon Kluger of Brody, and within the next few decades some eighteen other leading rabbis, particularly rabbis from Galicia as well as Hasidic rabbis, came out in opposition to the machine; some of them went so far as to declare machine-made matzah to be no better than *hametz*. Some two-dozen other rabbis, many of them from Lithuania, Central and Western Europe, and Jerusalem, strongly disagreed. Led by the influential posek Rabbi Joseph Saul Nathanson, who published a work entitled *Bittul Moda'ah*, annulling the announcement, they vigorously defended the matzah machine; some insisted that machine-made matzah was actually more kosher than the hand-made kind, because there was less possibility of human error. The arguments on both sides of the question were complex, and this is not the place to rehearse them. But it is worth noting that in addition to strictly *halakhic* arguments around issues such as whether the machine fulfills the requirement of *kavannah* (intentionality) in baking matzah, there were also other issues involved in the debate. For example, there were technological arguments: is the machine fully reliable in preventing *hametz* from entering the process? There were also social justice arguments – is it better to sustain traditional, expensive hand-made matzah that provides work for poor people, or is it better to encourage cheaper machine-made

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matzah that even poor people can afford? Finally, and one suspects most importantly, the machine kindled arguments concerning modernity. Supporters of machine-made matzah promoted the idea that modern technology could strengthen traditional Judaism; indeed, some rabbis optimistically argued that technology could produce better and more kosher matzahs than Jews had ever enjoyed before, at least since the days of the Second Temple. Meanwhile, opponents of the machine feared that machine-made matzah, like so many other innovations in matters of religious tradition, would become a dangerous instrument of modernity leading inevitably to assimilation, Reform, and apostasy. The Gerer Rebbe, for example, argued that supporters of the matzah machine sought as their long term aim to uproot the entire Torah. A later opponent insisted that the invention, from the beginning, was intended to introduce reforms into the religion of Israel.¹² These vituperative arguments were by no means settled by the time Manischewitz became involved in the matzah business. To the contrary, the Jewish world of his day was divided between those who accepted matzah made with the assistance of a machine and those who did not.

What Manischewitz Did

Before Manischewitz himself publicly took a stand on this divisive issue, he faced a more prosaic problem: competition in his own back yard. In the early 1890s a dispute developed between his friend and relative, Rabbi Hillkowitz, and a new rabbi in town – almost certainly Rabbi Simon (“Rashi”) Finkelstein, the father of Rabbi Louis Finkelstein, longtime chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary. As a result of this dispute, which seems to have had more to do with local power than with *halakhah*, Finkelstein himself entered the matzah business against Manischewitz. Behr Manischewitz wrote back to his father in Salant, seeking help from that community’s rabbi in the dispute. He feared that Finkelstein’s competition would deprive him of his livelihood and believed that his competitor was impermissibly intruding into his domain (*masig g’vul*). But in the end all he received in return was a fatherly *mussar shmooze*. “Make peace,” Yechiel Michael wrote his son, and he warned, in the best tradition of the then recently deceased Rabbi Israel Salanter, against any concern over honor and any involvement in quarrels and controversies “even if it will seem to you that the quarrel is for the sake of Heaven.”¹³ The advice was good, for Cincinnati was not like Memel or

Salant, and competitors could not have been shut down even if the rabbis had wanted to do so. The advice also proved propitious, since in the course of time the Manischewitzes and the Finkelsteins became related by marriage. The only real way for Manischewitz to achieve success in America's capitalist economy, Behr came to understand, was by gaining a competitive edge – that is (1) by cutting the production costs of his matzah so that his profit margin would be higher, or (2) by making a better matzah, one that was superior in quality and therefore more desirable, or (3) by improving the image of his matzah so that people considered it superior to the competition and purchased it. Manischewitz managed to follow all three of these roads to success, and as we shall see, the rabbis of the Holy Land played a part in his strategy.

Most importantly, Manischewitz introduced a series of improvements and inventions that revolutionized the process of matzah baking the world over. Continuing a trend that Singer's matzah machine had begun and that would become very familiar in the twentieth century, he yoked modern technology to the service of religion. In 1899, he purchased the matzah bakery of Moses Bing in Cincinnati and announced "improvements on machinery... of such a nature as positively to surpass anything of its kind in this country."¹⁴ By 1903, he was using at least three different machines as part of the matzah-making process: one that partially kneaded the dough, one that rolled it, and one that stretched the dough, perforated it, and cut it. A separate electric fan kept the premises cool.¹⁵ Later he introduced a gas-fired matzah baking oven (which allowed for better and more even distribution and control of heat) and an enormously important (and patented) "traveling-carrier bake-oven," a conveyor belt system that made it possible to automate the whole process of matzah baking: the dough was placed on one end and it slowly moved through the oven chambers emerging as evenly-baked identically-shaped matzah on the other end. Jacob Uriah Manischewitz, who succeeded his father as president of the Manischewitz company upon the former's untimely passing in 1914, is credited with more than fifty patents including an electric eye which automatically counted the number of matzos in a box at a rate of 600 a minute, as well as innovations in packaging, and a special "matsos machine," introduced in 1920, which could produce 1.25 million matzahs every day, and which he described, in 1938, as "the largest and most expensive single piece of machinery in any bakery in the world."¹⁶ Thanks to all of these innovations, Manischewitz could produce more matzah, more

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cheaply, with less breakage, and with a much more regular and pleasing appearance than had ever before been possible.

The result was nothing less than a revolution in the matzah business characterized by three major transformations: First, where before most matzah had been round, irregular or oval-shaped¹⁷ now, largely because of the demands of technology and packaging, it became square — in 1912, indeed, the matzot were specifically advertised as “Manischewitz’s Square Matzoths.”¹⁸ The issue of square matzah had been debated in the nineteenth century by Kluger and Nathanson,¹⁹ but most matzah, even that produced with the help of a rolling machine, remained round. Matzah produced by Manischewitz and its mechanized competitors, by contrast, was invariably square (though in 1942, “special V-shaped matzoths were baked as part of the ‘V for Victory’ movement,” during World War II.²⁰) Second, where before each matzah was unique and distinctive in terms of shape, texture, and overall appearance — no two were identical as is true of *shmurah matzah* to this day— now, every matzah in the box came out looking, feeling, and tasting the same. Matzah thus underwent the same processes of rationalization, standardization, and mechanization that we associate with the American management revolution wrought by Frederick Winslow Taylor.²¹ Manischewitz matzah, in short, became a distinctive brand of matzah, with all that that implied. Finally, where before matzah was a quintessentially local product, produced on an as-needed basis in every Jewish community and not shipped vast distances for fear of breakage, now it became a national and then an international product — just like soap and cereal. In time, along with smaller matzah brands like Horowitz-Margareten, Goodman, and Streits, Manischewitz would extend its market share to take maximum advantage of its ability to mass-produce matzah, and local matzah bakers who could not compete would go out of business. On a much larger scale, Cincinnati’s Proctor and Gamble was doing the same thing at roughly the same time to the production of soap and detergent.

Marketing Challenges and Solutions

But there is also a critical difference, extremely important for the student of religion, since in the case of matzah two very significant challenges had to be met before Manischewitz could take full advantage of these technological and business innovations, and translate them into commercial success. First, the company needed to confront popular resistance to changing a

long-familiar Passover ritual product. Matzah, after all, reflects and evokes a sense of tradition; it is, according to the Haggadah, “the bread of affliction that our fathers ate in the land of Egypt.” This was hard to reconcile with Manischewitz’s newfangled machine-made square matzah, and the company had therefore to find some way to make its new matzah seem not only superior but also “traditional” and religiously “authentic.” Second, the company needed to confront what we have seen to be significant rabbinic resistance to machine-made matzah. Given the volatility of the issue, and the emotional energy invested in it by both sides of the controversy, Manischewitz had every reason to be nervous about the reception that the matzot made by its new machine would receive. It must have known that it would need powerful rabbinic endorsement for its matzot to succeed in the marketplace.²²

Manischewitz confronted the first issue – how to make its matzot seem superior and authentic – through advertising. In Anglo-Jewish newspapers, the company described its matzot as being in all ways superior to the competition: they were produced in what the company called “a temple of *kashruth*, a palace of cleanliness, a gigantic structure of steel and glass, overflowing with light, air and sunshine.”²³ In other words, they met the highest American food and health standards; they were, in their own way, therapeutic. Indeed, Manischewitz advertised at one point that “No human hand touches these matsas in their manufacture,” as if this fact, rather than the production of matzot by hand, reflected Judaism’s highest precept!²⁴ By appealing to modern American consumer values to sell their traditional food product, the company implied that purchasers of Manischewitz matzah could subscribe to the highest values of both Judaism and America.

When it advertised in Hebrew and Yiddish to more Orthodox customers, Manischewitz switched gears and emphasized its high standard of *kashrut* (“the most kosher matzot in the world”). In 1920, it published an “open letter” to the Jewish public in the *Yiddisher Tageblatt* in which it touted its incomparable reputation for *kashrut* and announced technical innovations designed to make the world’s best matzah even better. It also published regular ads and placed articles in the rabbinic journal *HaPardes* touting the company’s “scrupulousness” in all aspects of the matzah-making process, as well as its utter reliability, attested to by the Agudath Ha-Rabbanim and Rabbi Pardes himself.²⁵

In the early years, Manischewitz marketed its matzah as an elite product.

The Magnificent Home of a Great Product

The MANISCHEWITZ BAKERY, in Cincinnati is a Temple of Kashruth, a place of cleanliness, a spot of spot and pest, overflowing with light, air and health, and, in the face of the family.

MANISCHEWITZ THIN MATZOS

Manischewitz Matzah is prepared by using Matzah of the Age for Kashruth, and is made from the most Landing and Philadelphia Matzah. Manischewitz Matzah is especially prepared for the most delicate and delicate Matzah, and is made from the most delicate and delicate Matzah, and is made from the most delicate and delicate Matzah.

"Manischewitz" — not Cincinnati

NO SEWAGES—ATTENTION! WITH MANISCHEWITZ MATZO MEAL, CAKE MEAL AND PERIZEL, YOU CAN MAKE THE MOST DELICIOUS PASSEOVER DISHES.

At all good Grocers, Delicatessen stores and restaurants in U.S.A., E.N. and 1900 Matzahs.

THE MANISCHEWITZ CO. CINCINNATI, O.

Typical English-language advertisements for Manischewitz matzah (1919-1920). The ads associate the firm's matzah with health and hygiene, as well as the highest standards of kashruth. They also indicate that the firm was facing competition from other brands that sought to imitate its success.

RECOGNIZED ALL OVER THE WORLD AS THE STANDARD FOR KASHRUTH AND QUALITY UNEQUALLED ESTABLISHED 1888

MANISCHEWITZ'S
CINCINNATI
MATZOS

ESTABLISHED 1888

Kosher and Wholesome Thin Matzos A Specialty

BEWARE OF IMITATIONS

SPECIAL one pound, five-pound and ten-pound sanitary Cakes, dust and moisture-proof. No human hand touches these Matzos in their manufacture, and they reach you as fresh and clean as when they leave our establishment, which is the largest Matzah bakery in the world. To be had at all Grocers, Delicatessen and grocery stores and restaurants.

SOLE DISTRIBUTOR FOR BOSTON AND VICINITY.
H. KAPLAN, 29 Troy St., Boston

It called them “fine matzos” and sold them in a cigar-type box which protected the contents and projected an aura of affluence. This, of course, was a clever attempt to give Manischewitz’s square matzahs extra cache. The company understood that if theirs became the preferred matzah of rich and powerful Jews, other Jews would soon follow suit. Apparently the strategy worked, for at one point in the 1920s the company claimed that it delivered matzah “to 80 per cent of the Jewish population of America and Canada.”²⁶

Rabbinic Endorsements

As important as its advertising was, Manischewitz also understood that it needed powerful rabbinic endorsements. Without them it could not hope to legitimate its machine-made square matzah, much less win over customers used to eating handmade, round matzah on Passover. Vituperative controversies over machine-made matzah, such as those that rocked Europe in the nineteenth century and divided Jerusalem in 1908-09, were to be avoided at all costs.²⁷

The company began with two great advantages peculiar to America. First, the majority of East European immigrants came to the United States from areas (such as Lithuania) where machine-made matzah had already won rabbinic sanction, and the immigrants tended in any case to favor accommodations to modernity; if not they would never have ventured to the New World in the first place. Hasidim comprised the strongest elements opposed to machine-made matzah, both in Europe and in Palestine, but in America their numbers prior to World War II were comparatively small, and their leadership pitifully weak. American soil was described by one writer in 1918 as being “rather unfavorable for the seed of the Hasidic cult,” and America’s four Hasidic rebbes at that time had almost no Hasidic followers. Even had Hasidim decided to wage war against machine-made matzah in America, they would not have posed much of a threat.²⁸

Second, even several rabbis opposed to machine-made matzah in Europe wrote early in the twentieth century to support its production in the United States. They understood that in the absence of machine-made matzah, the fast-growing American Jewish community might not have had sufficient matzah for its requirements, and they argued that in America, unlike in Eastern Europe, there was no tradition of handmade matzah that needed to be upheld. Thus, even in matters of Jewish law there was a sense at that time that “America is different.”²⁹

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Nevertheless, Manischewitz spared no effort to ensure that rabbis endorsed its matzah as appropriate even for the most religiously punctilious. As early as 1903, it announced that its bakery was open to all rabbis “seeking truth and righteousness,” and through the years many apparently took the firm up on the offer.³⁰ For its fiftieth anniversary, in 1938, the company published a list of 124 “leading figures of the generation,” most of them renowned rabbis (some by then deceased), who, it said, had visited the bakery and attested to its high level of *kashrut*. The list was headed by Rabbi Abraham I. Kook, chief rabbi of Eretz Israel, and it included Rabbi Meir Shapiro of Lublin, Rabbi Meier Hildesheimer of Berlin, and thirty-two other European rabbis, largely from Poland and Lithuania, along with nine rabbis from the land of Israel, the chief rabbi of Cairo, the leaders of the Agudath ha-Rabbanim in the United States, and dozens of other American rabbis from cities across the land.³¹ A pamphlet entitled *Kashrut at Manischewitz* (1955) offered testimonials from some of these luminaries. According to its information, Rabbi Shapiro, the founder of Yeshivath Hakhmei Lublin and of the Daf Yomi, “ate only Manischewitz Matzos throughout the year,” since he “was never sure of the strict *kashruth* of bread.”³² Most rabbis did not go that far, but especially in the United States the leading rabbis did agree to link their names to Manischewitz, thereby endowing its matzah with special prestige. At an annual ceremony in the weeks prior to Passover, rabbis gathered to tour the Manischewitz plant, to witness the baking of machine-made *shmurah matzah* prepared especially for the most fervent of Jews, and to enjoy a scrumptious banquet, complete with learned lectures from leaders of the Agudath ha-Rabbanim. The setting, along with the prestigious rabbinical names associated with it, generated substantial publicity in Orthodox circles, buttressing Manischewitz’s claim to be the most kosher matzah of them all.³³

Ties to Zion

In its fiftieth anniversary publication, published in *HaPardes*, Manischewitz paid special attention to the ties that it had forged with the Land of Israel. Letters in Hebrew from Jerusalem’s Chief Rabbi, Zvi Pesach Frank, and the head of Yeshivat Merkaz HaRav, Jacob M. Charlap, appeared on facing pages near the front of the booklet, second in prominence only to the letter from the American Agudath ha-Rabbanim. The Jerusalem rabbis, known supporters of machine-made matzah, extolled the *kashrut* and quality of

Manischewitz's matzah, as well as the great love of Zion and openhanded generosity of Hirsch Manischewitz, Behr Manischewitz's son and the firm's vice-president. Learned articles in the publication were likewise composed in Eretz Israel, by rabbis who had ties with Manischewitz. Indeed, the whole publication bespoke the firm's well known love of Zion, and the respect that the leading religious figures in Zion had for Manischewitz.³⁴

This relationship dated all the way back to the company's founder, who established close ties to Jerusalem early in the twentieth century. Behr Manischewitz even sent his sons, Max and Hirsch, to study there: Hirsch began his studies in 1901, when he was only ten years old, and remained in Eretz Israel for thirteen years studying successively at Yeshivoth Etz Chaim (1901-1907), Torath Chaim (1908-1910), and Meah Shearim (1910-1914). Max, who was two years older, attended public school in Cincinnati and only subsequently sailed off to study in Palestine; he too studied for the rabbinate at Yeshivath Etz Chaim. Both brothers married daughters of what were later described as "well-known families in Jerusalem." Max married Edith Cohen in 1907 and Hirsch married Sarah Wolfe in 1910. Subsequently, the Manischewitzes took great pride in being "inter-related with the nicest families in the Holy City." Hirsch Manischewitz also took great pride in the prestigious rabbis with whom he had studied in Jerusalem. Twenty-five years later, his official biography in *Who's Who in American Jewry* still recorded the names of those rabbis, several of whom, notably Isaac Blazer, were well-known figures in the Mussar movement.³⁵

Beyond these educational and familial ties, the Manischewitz family also made significant charitable donations to Eretz Israel. Hirsch Manischewitz, while studying in Jerusalem, organized a free loan society, a sick benefit foundation, and a relief fund for the poor; he also served on the board of the Kollel Amerika.³⁶ Upon the death of the family patriarch, Behr Manischewitz, in 1914, his sons established a small Jerusalem yeshiva in their father's name, known as the Rabbi Behr Manischewitz Yeshiva. Through the years, Hirsch Manischewitz took a special interest in this yeshiva and the Manischewitz company made modest annual donations to it, ranging from \$1250 - \$3300. The yeshiva featured very prominently in the firm's fiftieth anniversary publication booklet.³⁷

The fact that the Jerusalem yeshiva actually carried the Manischewitz name is somewhat curious. None of the best known yeshivot in Eretz Israel at that time, including those where Hirsch Manischewitz himself had studied,

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carried the last name of a donor family, and one wonders why Manischewitz Yeshiva was different. Could not the yeshiva simply have been called Yeshivas Rabbi Dov Behr? In 1948, as part of a court case to which we shall return, a revealing reason was supplied. "Yeshiva graduates," the Manischewitz company told the court, "teach as rabbis in Palestine, Europe and South America. They have the name Manischewitz associated with them and are helping to overcome the impression of Orthodox European Jews that American machine-made matzos are not kosher."³⁸

The Manischewitz yeshiva, in other words, formed part of a larger strategy aimed at utilizing the prestige of rabbis from Eretz Israel to legitimate the machine-made square matzot that Manischewitz produced, and to help promote them around the world. The rabbis who taught at Manischewitz Yeshiva sanctioned the use of machine-made matzah on Passover, and Manischewitz also supplied the matzah that was actually served at the yeshiva on Passover. Indeed, at least in the eyes of the company, the graduates of the yeshiva formed the vanguard of a worldwide matzah empire that, it hoped, would spread machine-made Manischewitz matzah beyond the borders of North America to Jews throughout the diaspora and in Palestine. As opposed to some of its other charity, which was handled privately, Manischewitz in this case gave substantial publicity to its association with Manischewitz Yeshiva. It viewed the yeshiva students it supported as future missionaries for its cause, as well as living symbols of those Jewish values—piety, charity, and commitment to learning—that would make its matzah trusted and welcomed in Jewish homes everywhere.³⁹

Just after World War One, the Manischewitzes established one further link between themselves and the rabbis of Eretz Israel. They brought over from Jerusalem Rabbi Mendel M. Hochstein, the son of one of Hirsch Manischewitz's old teachers, and they made him the *kashrut* supervisor (head *mashgiah*) at their bakery in Cincinnati; he also served as the rabbi of Congregation Ansche Sholom. Later, when the company moved to New Jersey, Rabbi Hochstein moved with them, serving in addition as the rabbi of Brooklyn's aptly named Kehilath Bnai Eretz Yisrael. In its advertising, Manischewitz regularly mentioned that Rabbi Hochstein had trained and lived in Jerusalem. It knew that scrupulous Jews in Europe would trust a Jerusalem *mashgiah* over an American one. Indeed, when Rabbi Meir Dan Plotzki of Ostrova, on a visit to America, pronounced Manischewitz matzah to be thoroughly reliable ("there is none more faithful to be found"), he

revealingly singled out for praise “the constant supervision of one of the sages of Jerusalem” — Rabbi Hochstein.⁴⁰

In short, a complex, reciprocal, and mutually beneficial relationship developed between Manischewitz and the rabbis of the Holy Land: each provided the other with what they needed. Manischewitz provided material support to Jerusalem charities, and the Manischewitz yeshiva provided a position for Rabbi Hochstein and treated Jerusalem’s rabbis with special respect and status, implying without ever saying so that they were the central rabbinic figures in the Jewish world. In return, the rabbis provided them with public recognition, the kinds of recommendations that they needed to expand abroad, and rabbinic approbation for their machine-made matzah. For years, the firm advertised that Rav Kook and later “the Chief Rabbinate of Israel” recognized that it offered “the greatest possible assurance of *kashruth*.” It also became the only matzah in the world to receive certification from the Agudath ha-Rabbanim during the interwar years. Its “association with the Yeshiva in Palestine,” it admitted, “was of some aid in obtaining th[is] annual ‘hechsher.’” As a result of all of this, Manischewitz did for some time gain a reputation in Europe as being the most kosher matzah of all. My own maternal grandmother in London, scion of a distinguished Hasidic line, preferred Manischewitz matzah for this very reason and selected it over local English brands. This is particularly remarkable when one remembers America’s longstanding reputation among Orthodox Jews as being lax in matters of religion, a *treifene medinah*.⁴¹

The benefits that accrued to the Manischewitz Company from its contributions to Eretz Yisrael do not detract from the evident altruistic, philanthropic, and Zionist impulses of the Manischewitz family. Their interest in *tzedaka*, their love of Israel, and their support for religious Zionism — all are beyond question. Hirsch Manischewitz devoted the better part of his public activities to charitable Orthodox causes, mostly but not exclusively related to Eretz Israel. His brother, Max Manischewitz, sought to promote the industrial development of the yishuv; and in the nineteen-twenties proposed ambitious plans to open matzah, noodle and macaroni factories in Jerusalem, as well as a kosher hotel. Indeed, the official Manischewitz logo, a heartfelt one, proclaimed in Hebrew “Next Year in Jerusalem.”⁴² Manischewitz’s philanthropic and religious activities, however, were never wholly separate from its business considerations, particularly since the firm’s religious reliability played a significant part in its marketing. Indeed, the inter-

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relationship of business, technology, philanthropy, and faith helped to determine the success of the Manischewitz company. Its reputation and religious ties, coupled with its technological prowess, business acumen, and clever advertising, go far to explain how its square, machine-made matzah won rabbinic sanction, and how over the course of the first half of the twentieth century, this kind of matzah became normative and ubiquitous.



Rabbis and students of Manischewitz Yeshiva surrounded by photos of Behr Manischewitz (left) and Hirsch Manischewitz (right).

From a special supplement honoring fifty years of the Manischewitz company in *HaPardes 11* (March 1938).

Manischewitz v. Commissioner of Internal Revenue

Much of what I have described here would not be known but for a 1948 case in the United States Tax Court. The case arose when the Internal Revenue Service challenged the right of the B. Manischewitz Company to deduct a payment made to Manischewitz Yeshiva as “an ordinary and necessary business expense.” It could not otherwise have deducted these payments, since the Jerusalem yeshiva did not qualify as a charitable organization (“to which contributions by corporations are deductible”) under the tax code in effect at that time. Manischewitz fought the tax collection agency’s

challenge, and in so doing made the case that its donations to the yeshiva bore a direct relationship to its business, having been made (as per the law) "with a reasonable expectation of a financial return commensurate with the amount of the donation." In the course of the company's deposition it frankly set forth some of the benefits that its philanthropy produced including, as mentioned, that it helped "to overcome the impression. . . that American machine-made matzos are not kosher" and that it was "beneficial in publicizing" the company's product. "Payments for support of the Yeshiva," the company candidly concluded, "have been made from combined religious, charitable, personal, and business motives." The court solemnly agreed: "Although there can be little doubt that the contributions to the seminary were prompted by a complex of motives," the precedent-setting decision declared, the deduction was legal, given that there were "reasonably evident business ends to be served, and the intention to serve them appears adequately from the record."⁴³

Conclusion

The episode that we have recounted here is interesting in its own right as an unusual case study in the interrelationship of business, technology, charity and faith, and also for what it reveals about how religious innovations like square-shaped, machine-made matzah transformed the matzah industry, won rabbinic approbation and, as a result, achieved widespread public acceptance. What is especially noteworthy here is the fact that Manischewitz used rabbinic figures in Jerusalem to achieve this goal; the company did not exert parallel efforts to win support from the rabbis of Behr Manischewitz's native Lithuania. Traditional religious and Zionist motivations, as well as familiar East European prejudices concerning American Judaism, may well be sufficient to explain this anomaly, but a larger theme may be reflected here as well. For Manischewitz's turn toward Zion reflected a much broader challenge to East European rabbinic hegemony posed in the late nineteenth century by the rise of the two new centers of Jewish life: America and Eretz Israel. The reciprocal relationship that worked to the mutual advantage of Manischewitz and the Jerusalem rabbis formed part of a larger pattern of relationships that, at once, proclaimed American Jewry's independence from the rabbinic "establishment" in Europe and its desire to play a significant role of its own in Jewish life. The establishment of the Kollel Amerika Tifereth Yerushalayim in 1896 reflects some of this same dynamic, and it may

be more than coincidence that, as we have seen, Hirsch Manischewitz served, for a time, on its executive committee. For similar reasons, one suspects, American Orthodox rabbis preferred to publish their Hebrew books in Palestine, rather than in Eastern Europe. Later, the Orthodox Jewish lay-leader Harry Fischel carried this tradition forward, doing much to strengthen ties between Orthodox lay leaders in America and the rabbis of Eretz Israel.⁴⁴ The rabbis of the yishuv, of course, had their own reasons for wanting to shift the center of Jewish life away from Eastern Europe, and they had every incentive to cooperate with American Jewry to this end, particularly when the latter proved so wonderfully generous and philanthropic. Cooperation to advance the sale of Manischewitz matzah, in other words, is just one episode in a much larger and yet-to-be-written history tracing the emergence of rabbinic authority in the new centers of Jewish life, in the United States and Israel, and the ties that bound these new centers together.

For now, though, we have seen that the lowly matzah turns out to have a history that sheds light on subjects of far-reaching importance. The B. Manischewitz company no longer exists today as an independent entity – it is now part of a great conglomerate – but its achievement should not be forgotten. For in the final analysis, what has been recounted here is not just the story of how matzah became square and machine-made matzah became normative. It is also the story of how traditional Judaism itself became normative in America – a story that involves, as we have seen, technology, business, politics, philanthropy, ties to Israel, and above all, an ongoing commitment to Jewish law and Jewish life.

NOTES

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¹ Norman L. Kleeblatt with Anita Friedman, *Larry Rivers' History of Matzah: The Story of the Jews* (New York: Jewish Museum, 1984).

² "Manischewitz, Jacob Uriah," *Who's Who in American Jewry* 3 (1938), liii provides the date of 1885 as the year of emigration, but other sources refer to the "mid-eighties," and documents in the American Jewish Archives (n.5) say 1886.

³ Yosef Shulman, "Memel," *Yahadut Lita* (Tel Aviv, 1967), 3:281-83; see also p. 195.

⁴ Immanuel Etkes, *Rabbi Israel Salanter and the Mussar Movement: Seeking the Torah of Truth* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1993), 242-255; *Kashrut at Manischewitz* (B. Manischewitz Co, 1955), 1; "Rabbi Dov Behr Manischewitz," (www.manischewitz.com/108years.htm); the brief biography in *Yahadut Lita*, p. 195 mentions only that he "served" Rabbi Salanter and received from him ordination as a "shohet ubodek."

⁵ Gerald Taft, "Background of Letters of Dov Behr Manischewitz and Family (December 14, 1987)," Manischewitz letters to his family in Russia, Correspondence Files, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, OH; Masha Greenbaum, *The Jews of Lithuania* (Jerusalem: Gefen, 1995), 285; *Yahadut Lita*, III, p.332; see also Joan Nathan, "The Bread of Our Affection," *Moment* 20 (April 1995), 31; *idem*, *Jewish Cooking in America* (New York: Knopf, 1994), 107. Note that the

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“Rabbi Eliayu Heshel” mentioned repeatedly in Dov Behr’s letters is almost certainly Hillkowitz. See Dov Behr Manischewitz to Yechiel Michael Manischewitz (April 27, 1887), Manischewitz letters, and compare Jonathan D. Sarna and Nancy H. Klein, *The Jews of Cincinnati* (Cincinnati: Center for the Study of the American Jewish Experience, 1989), 67, 79.

⁶ Moshe D. Sherman, “Bernard Illowy and Nineteenth Century American Orthodoxy,” (Ph.D., Yeshiva University, 1991), 30-31; Hyman B. Grinstein, *The Rise of the Jewish Community of New York 1654-1860* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1945), 306-310.

⁷ Barnett R. Brickner, “The Jewish Community of Cincinnati Historical and Descriptive 1817-1933,” (Ph.D., University of Cincinnati, 1933), 122; Sherman, “Bernard Illowy and Nineteenth Century American Orthodoxy,” 31 n.9; Jonathan D. Sarna (transl. & ed.), *People Walk On Their Heads: Moses Weinberger’s Jews and Judaism in New York* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1981), 73. Daniel Sperber, *Minhage Yisrael* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1991), II, 141-142 chronicles the development of the stringency known as *shmurah matzah*, where the wheat is continually “watched” following its harvesting.

⁸ See *Shulhan Arukh*, OH 459:2 and also the discussion in the *Arukh HaShulhan*; for earlier authorities, see *Encyclopedia Talmudit* 16 (1980), 84-86.

⁹ For various accounts in Europe and America, see *Jewish Tribune*, April 4, 1925; Beatrice S. Weinreich, “The Americanization of Passover,” *Studies in Biblical and Jewish Folklore*, ed. Raphael Patai (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1960), 333-335; *New York Times*, April 9, 1995; Eve Jochnowitz, “Holy Rolling: Making Sense of Baking Matzo,” *Jews of Brooklyn*, eds. Ilana Abramovitch and Sean Galvin (Hanover & London: Brandeis University Press, 2002), 72-77; compare T.B. Pesahim 48b and Steven Fine, “The Halakhic Motif in Jewish Iconography: The Matzah-Baking Cycles of the *Yahuda* and *Second Nurnberg Haggadahs*,” *A Crown for a King: Studies in Jewish Art, History and Archaeology in Memory of Stephen S. Kayser*, eds. Shalom Sabar, Steven Fine and William M. Kramer (Berkeley: Judah L. Magnes Museum, 2000), 105-122.

¹⁰ Grinstein, *Rise of the Jewish Community of New York*, 308-309, 446; Sherman, "Bernard Illowy and Nineteenth Century American Orthodoxy," 30-31.

¹¹ Joseph Saul Nathanson, *Kuntres Bitul Moda'ah*, (Lemberg: 1859; reprinted Jerusalem, 1972) is the standard source for this history. I have also been fortunate to read an advance copy of an important study by Meir Hildesheimer and Yehoshua Lieberman entitled "The Controversy Surrounding Machine-Made Matzot: Halakhic, Social and Economic Repercussions."

¹² The volumes by Kluger and Nathanson have been reprinted together in Jerusalem (1972). Abstracts of most of the major responsa may be found in *HeHashmal BeHalakhah* (Jerusalem: Institute for Science and Halacha, 1978), I, 84-135. The best and most complete discussion in English is Hildesheimer and Lieberman, "The Controversy Surrounding Machine-Made Matzot," see especially notes 132 and 260 for those who considered machine-made matzah a tool in the hands of assimilationists and reformers. See also David Ellenson, "Jewish Legal Interpretation: Literary, Scriptural, Social and Ethical Perspectives," *Semeia* 34 (1985), 93-114; and Daniel Landes, "Response to David Ellenson," *Ibid*, 123-120; as well as Haim Gertner, "Gevulot Hahashpa'ah Shel Rabanut Galitsya... R. Shlomo Kluger Kemikreh Mivhan" (M.A. dissertation, Hebrew University, 1996), 49-52 and works cited below, n. 22.

¹³ Y.M. Manischewitz to Moshe Mendel Manischewitz (February 1892), Manischewitz letters, correspondence files, AJA.

¹⁴ *American Israelite*, March 30, 1899, [advertising page]; April 12, 1900 [advertising page].

¹⁵ Rabbi Abraham Jacob Gerson Lesser of Cincinnati supervised the kashrut of Manischewitz at this time, and describes this machinery and the whole process of matzah-making at the plant in an "Open Letter" published in *Bet Va'ad La'hakhamim* I (Shvat 1903). The description resembles the machine described by Rabbi Zechariah Joseph Rosenfeld in *Sefer Yosef Tikvah* (St. Louis, 1903), 6-11. Rosenfeld insisted that the fan did not really slow the fermentation process and therefore its presence had no halakhic implications (see pp. 52-56, 102-105).

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¹⁶ See patents 930,673 (filed Oct. 21, 1907), and especially 1,169,555 (filed Oct. 28, 1911), U.S. Patent Office; "Jacob Uriah Manischewitz," *Who's Who in American Jewry* 3 (1938-39), liii; *Yiddisher Tageblatt*, January 9, 1920, p.2; April 7, 1924, p.6; G. Selikowitz, "The Matzo City," *Hebrew Standard*, February 13, 1920, p.17; and *Kashrut at Manischewitz*, pp.1-2.

¹⁷ Some attached theological significance to the round shape. For different views see J.D. Eisenstein, *Ozar Dinim Uminhagim* (New York: Hebrew Publishing Co., 1917), 248, and Weinreich, "The Americanization of Passover," 347.

¹⁸ *American Hebrew*, March 12, 1912.

¹⁹ See, for example, Nathanson, *Bittul Moda'ah*, 2b, 14a.

²⁰ *Universal Jewish Encyclopedia* 7 (1942), 414.

²¹ Samuel Haber, *Efficiency and Uplift: Scientific Management in the Progressive Era, 1890-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964).

²² Solomon B. Freehof, *The Responsa Literature* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1955), 181-189 summarizes the controversy over machine-made matzah; see also Philip Goodman, *The Passover Anthology* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1961), 90-92; J. D. Eisenstein, *Otzar Dinim u-Minhagim* (New York: Hebrew Publishing Co., 1917), 248; and "Matzah," *Ozar Yisrael Encyclopedia* (New York: 1907-1913), VI, 277-278. Rabbi Zechariah Joseph Rosenfeld's *Sefer Yosef Tikvah* represented a pioneering attempt by an American Orthodox rabbi to determine the halakhic conditions under which machine-matzot — which, he admitted, were widely used in America — might be found acceptable. The book's *haskamot* indicate that the issue remained controversial. For more recent sources and a "Da'as Torah" opposing machine-made matzah, see Sholom Y. Gross, *Mitzvah Encyclopedia*, (New York, 1981), I, pp.65-68.

²³ *Hebrew Standard*, March 26, 1920, p.9. The *Shulhan Arukh* OH 459:1 prohibits kneading in the sunlight for fear of fermentation, and most matzah bakeries were consequently in dark cellars. The speed and temperature in

Manischewitz's factory apparently made this issue moot; see also the discussion in *Arukh HaShulhan* 459:3-4. In the *Yiddisher Tageblatt*, April 3, 1922, p.9, the Manischewitz company specifically boasted that its founder "liberated" matzah "from the dark cellars and raised matzah baking to the level of an industry" (translation mine).

²⁴ *Jewish Advocate*, March 6, 1919, p.6. See T. Jackson Lears, "From Salvation to Self-Realization: Advertising and the Therapeutic Roots of the Consumer Culture, 1880-1930," *The Culture of Consumption*, eds. Richard Wightman Fox and T. Jackson Lears (New York: Pantheon, 1983), 1-38.

²⁵ *Yiddisher Tageblatt*. January 9, 1920, p.2; *HaPardes* 4 (March 1931), 28; 6 (March 1933), 6, 34; and particularly the special section of *HaPardes* dedicated to the 50th anniversary of Manischewitz, 11 (March 1938), 27-53 (all translations mine).

²⁶ *Getting Comfortable in New York: The American Jewish Home, 1880-1950*, eds. Susan L. Braunstein and Jenna Weissman Joselit (New York: Jewish Museum, 1990), 42 portrays the "fine matzos" sample box; the 80% claim is in Selikowitz, "The Matzo City," 17.

²⁷ Daniel Schwartz, "Pulmus Matsot Ha-Mekhonah BeYerushalayim," *Sinai* 122 (1998), 113-128.

²⁸ *The Jewish Communal Register of New York City 1917-1918* (New York: 1918), 341-346; cf. Ira Robinson, "The First Hasidic Rabbis in North America," *American Jewish Archives* 44 (1992): 501-506.

²⁹ See the letters and recommendations contained in Rosenfeld, *Sefer Yosef Tikvah*, esp. p.V; and sources cited in Schwartz, "Pulmus Matsot Ha-Mekhonah BeYerushalayim," 114, n.8.

³⁰ "Mikhtav Galui," *Bet Va'ad La'hakhamim* 1 (Shvat 1903), n.p..

³¹ *HaPardes* 11 (March 1938), supplement (now available on-line at www.hebrewbooks.org).

³² *Kashrut at Manischewitz*, p.3.

³³ *HaPardes* 14 (April 1940), 19; cf. Weinreich, "The Americanization of Pass-over," 347.

³⁴ *HaPardes* 11 (March 1938), supplement, esp. pp.26-27.

³⁵ *Who's Who in American Jewry* 3 (1938-39), 702. The rabbis mentioned were: "Rabbis Hochstern [Hochstein], Isaac Blasar, Zorach Braverman, Tuvia Rose, and Rabbi Hirsch of Slobodka."

³⁶ *Ibid*, 702; *New York Times*, October 10, 1943, p.49 col. 2.

³⁷ The case of *The B. Manischewitz Company, Petitioner v. Commissioner of Internal Revenue, Respondent*, 10 T.C. 1139, at 1140 lists the firm's donations to the yeshiva from 1920-1947. The *Encyclopaedia Judaica's* claim (vol. 11, col. 878) that the yeshiva closed in 1943 would thus seem to be in error.

³⁸ *Manischewitz v. Commissioner of Internal Revenue* at 1141.

³⁹ *Manischewitz v. Commissioner of Internal Revenue* at 1141-1142. For Hirsch Manischewitz's interest in shipping matzah to "Argentine and other Latin republics of South America, as well as to South Africa and many European countries, besides... the Holy Land," see Selikowitz, "The Matzo City," 17.

⁴⁰ *Kashrut at Manischewitz*, 3-4; Jonathan D. Sarna and Nancy H. Klein, *The Jews of Cincinnati* (Cincinnati: Center for the Study of the American Jewish Experience, 1989), 123; *Kashrut at Manischewitz*, p.3.

⁴¹ *Manischewitz v. Commissioner of Internal Revenue* at 1141-1142.

⁴² *Who's Who in American Jewry* 3 (1938-39), 702; *New York Times*, October 10, 1943, pp.49:2; Nathan M. Kaganoff (ed.), *Guide to America-Holy Land Studies 1620-1948. Volume 3. Economic Relations and Philanthropy* (New York: Praeger, 1983), 38, cf. 46.

⁴³ *Manischewitz v. Commissioner of Internal Revenue* at 1141-1144.

⁴⁴ Simcha Fishbane, "The Founding of Kollel America Tifereth Yerushalayim," *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 64 (December 1974), 120-136; Nathan M. Kaganoff, "American Rabbinic Books Published in Palestine," *A Bicentennial Festschrift for Jacob Rader Marcus*, ed. B.W.Korn (New York: Ktav, 1976), 235-261; Herbert S. Goldstein, *Forty Years of Struggle for a Principle: The Biography of Harry Fischel* (New York: Bloch, 1928).