



The Machine Matzah Controversy

By Shmuel Singer

Dating back to the time of Moshe Rabbeinu, the practice, until the nineteenth century, had always been to make matzah by hand. With the advent of the Industrial Revolution in the first half of the nineteenth century, however, things changed. In France, in 1838, Isaac Singer invented the first machine for baking matzah.

With the popularization of the machine, a major halachic controversy broke out when Rabbi Shlomo Kluger of Brody (1785-1869) came out in opposition to machine matzah in 1859. Some rabbis who sided with Rabbi Kluger even contended that machine matzah was no better than *chametz*. Great rabbis of the era who opposed machine matzah include Rabbi Yitzchak Meir Alter of Gur (1789-1866), Rabbi Chaim Halberstam of Sanz (1793-1876) and other Chassidic rabbis, particularly from Galicia. Equally great personalities, mostly from Central and Western Europe, including Rabbi Yosef S. Nathanson of Lemberg (1810-1875), Rabbi Abraham Shmuel B. Sofer of Pressburg (the Ktav Sofer) (1815-1871) and Rabbi Yaakov Ettlinger of Altona (1798-1871), maintained that machine

matzah was actually *more* kosher than handmade matzah. (See two works issued in the nineteenth century: *Moda'ah LeBeit Yisrael*, a collection of *teshuvot* forbidding use of the machine, and *Bittul Moda'ah*, a collection of *teshuvot* permitting its use.) As the matzah-baking machine spread to other parts of the Jewish world, many great rabbinic personalities from Lithuania, Eretz Yisrael and the Sephardic countries also expressed their approval of the machine.

Why were some rabbis so opposed to machine matzah? One objection was that since the machinery consisted of many small parts it was impossible to clean it adequately. Dough remnants could potentially become *chametz* and mix with the newly made Pesach dough. There was also concern that if machine matzah were to be made in the traditional round shape, pieces of dough would have to be cut off and combined with the general dough mixture. Here again, there was fear of those pieces becoming *chametz* before being returned to the dough.

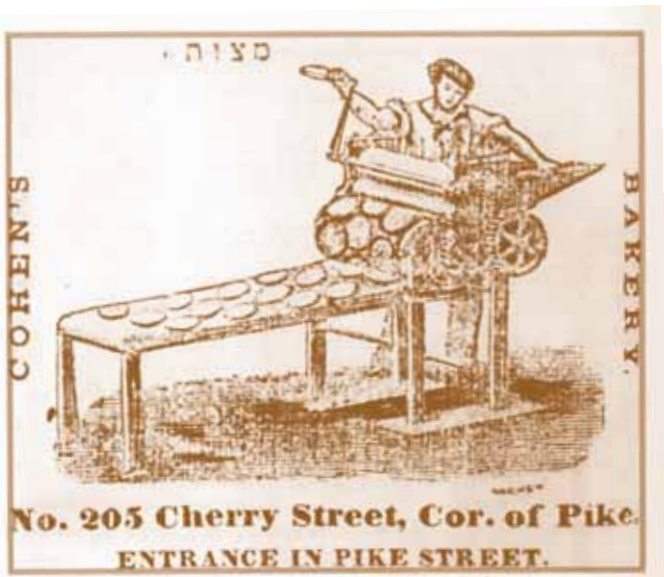
The defenders of the machine maintained that to the contrary, a machine is easier to clean than the equipment used for making hand matzah. The rabbis did concede, however, that round-shaped matzot might lead

to problems, and therefore they determined that machine matzah should be square shaped.

More general concerns were raised as well. Were machines to replace the handmade matzah bakeries, many indigent families would lose their primary source of income. The defenders responded that such an argument was not valid, especially since the machine could arguably raise the kosher status of matzah. Additionally, they asserted that the use of a machine could result in a considerable price reduction of matzah, which would greatly benefit the poor.

A most interesting objection concerned innovation in general. The argument went as follows: Innovation, even if halachically defensible, should be avoided, as one change leads to another, and eventually serious changes would be made in Jewish life and mitzvah observance. This argument reveals much about this period of Jewish history. Halachic Judaism was under constant assault and constantly forced to give ground. More and more Jewish communities and practices were lost to the encroaching modernism. Those who were lenient on the issue of machine matzah were generally less fearful of the onslaught of modernity on Orthodox Judaism and did not feel the same need to thwart innovation in Jewish life.

Rabbi Singer has been the coordinator of Pesach supervision for the OU for the last sixteen years.



Early matzah machine. Photo courtesy of Gefen Publishing House, 1992

The halachic concerns mentioned above centered around *matzah peshutah*, that is, ordinary matzah—for use during the eight days of the holiday. A more heated controversy concerned *matzah shemurah*, that is, matzah used at the Seder to fulfill the mitzvah of *achilat matzah*, eating matzah. According to most authorities, the Torah requirement to eat matzah only applies to the Seder night. While the Torah for-

bids one from eating *chametz* during the rest of Pesach, there is no obligation to consume matzah on those days. Hence, there are more stringent requirements for *matzah shemurah* than there are for *matzah peshutah*.

Thus, *matzah shemurah* must be made from grain that is guarded (so that it will not come into contact with water) from the time the wheat is reaped. In contrast, *matzah peshutah* is made from grain that is guarded from the time it is ground into flour. *Matzah shemurah* must also be prepared with the intention of fulfilling the mitzvah of *achilat matzah*. This means that if the cutting, grinding, kneading and baking of the matzah were done without the proper *kavanah* (intention), then the resulting product may not be used to fulfill the mitzvah at the Seder.

This brings us to the primary objection against machine matzah: *matzah shemurah* needs to be made by committed Jews who have the proper *kavanah*, and a machine could obviously have no such *kavanah*. The defenders of the machine asserted that a machine was a tool, no different than a rolling pin, and therefore, it sufficed if the Jew operating the machine had the correct *kavanah*.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, virtually the entire non-Chassidic world accepted the use of machine *matzah peshutah* for the eight days of Pesach. Most Chassidim continue to disagree. Similarly, the debate about using machine *matzah shemurah* at the Seder continues until the present day. **JA**

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