Roll Up Your Sleeves, Get Out the Flour, The Seder is Starting!
By Rabbi Benay Lappe

It all started when I bought a toy flour mill for my two-year-old daughter Molly a few weeks before Passover. I was preparing for the tot Shabbat program I lead each month, and, while we usually make challah every month, it was obvious that for our Passover session, we could hardly make challah. We’d have to make...matzo. So, I figured I could make the process a little more “colorful” and interesting by grinding our own flour. This gave me the perfect excuse to buy that not-inexpensive (but fully functioning) flour mill I’d seen in the organic toy catalog that I’d been wanting but couldn’t justify buying.

The mill came, I clamped it on the kitchen table, and went out and bought wheat berries (who knew what wheat looked like before it was flour, except for, if you’re as old as I am, those scenes of “…amber waves of grain...” during America the Beautiful before the television stations signed off at night). I dumped a small amount of the berries into the hopper, and, with Molly’s help, turned the crank. Oh. My. Gosh. Out came flour. A soft, fine, beautiful, perfect (warm!) powder. Just like from the store! And all of a sudden it hit me! This is what our ancestors were doing in Egypt. This is what the whole eating-matzo thing is about. It’s not about eating the matzo. It’s about making it to eat it. The goal of seeing ourselves as slaves in Egypt isn’t accomplished by simply eating the matzo, but by what it takes to eat the matzo: the making of it!

Then I started digging. In the Torah, the mishnah, the Talmud, the codes. I learned everything I could about matzo and came upon the most striking revelation. [Something they never taught us in rabbinical school!] Guess what? Turns out, the halacha is that each and every Jew make their own matzo! And when? On the afternoon of the first seder—after you’ve cleaned out your entire house of chametz, and even burned the remaining chametz, and recited the if-there’s-any-more-here-it’s-null-and-void prayer—you’re supposed to get out the flour and make matzo on your kitchen table! So the seder really begins with making your own matzo with your guests right before you sit down for the (rest of the) seder!
This was a revelation to me, but, given the light-bulb experience I’d had when I started cranking the crank of that flour mill, I knew it made sense. Here we were, thinking we were being so “traditional” by buying our factory-made store-bought kosher-for-Passover matzo, or being “extra-frum” by buying Israeli shmura matzo “from the experts”—when the most traditional way to observe the holiday is to make our own! And when you think about it, store-bought matzo has only been around a hundred years or so, so making-your-own-matzo was how our not-so-distant ancestors must have all observed Pesach not that long ago!

How did we get so far from the intended experience in so short a time? How did we give up our sense of authenticity to those who mass-produce “real” matzo? When did we come to believe those who showed us how matzo was made but then insisted, “Don’t try this at home!”? Let us not shlep one more group of Hebrew school kids to a Chabad matzo factory to learn how “the real Jews” make matzo! And to learn that we certainly couldn’t be trusted to make our own!

The tradition was meant for every single Jew to be able to perform every single mitzvah (with, originally, a few gender-specific exceptions). After all, fathers were meant to circumcise their own sons. And if they can do that, we can certainly make our own matzo. The tradition isn’t afraid we’re going to mess it up, get it wrong, make a mistake, or chametz-up our houses. It’s not so worried that we’re going to make chamez-dik matzo that it wants us to farm out the experience. No, it says, do it yourself. Learn how to do it right. Be meticulous and careful. And then do your best. And feel what it feels like to really be in Egypt, to really make and eat the bread of our affliction…and the bread of our freedom.

I’m on a mission to reclaim this lost mitzvah. To deepen the Passover experience. To use all the technologies our tradition so wisely provided for us to really try to get the experience of slavery, so that we can really get what we need to do to end that oppression for everyone in the world who is still living it. Making (so much more than just eating) matzo is a powerful Jewish technology that I would like to bring back into practice. And with
it, I hope, the conviction that each of us can own our own Judaism and live it without fear of making a mistake or getting it wrong.

My dream is that, when my now-six-year-old daughter Molly prepares for her family’s seders, she’ll not only bring up the Pesadiky dishes from the basement, but she’ll bring up the flour mill and the hole-punch rollers and the wheat berries and the quarry tiles, and, like all the other Jewish families she knows, will gather with her guests around the kitchen table in the hours before the four questions are read, and make the matzo they will eat during the seder and the week ahead, and do their best to understand what it means to be enslaved, and what it means to be free and what that freedom requires of us.

How to Fulfill the Mitzvah of Making Your Own Matzo*

1. Line a shelf in your oven with about 4 unglazed quarry tiles (it is essential that they be UNGLAZED; glazed tiles have lead in the glaze), which you can buy from a large hardware or tile store for about 40 cents a tile. OR: Use a pizza stone.
2. Preheat your oven to 500 degrees.
3. Have all your utensils laid out: mixing bowl, water, flour (ANY kind is fine; the ordinary kind you buy in any grocery store makes perfectly kosher-for-Passover matzo; OR, to get the full effect, invest $200 in an amazing wooden hand-crank flour mill from www.novanatural.com and grind your own wheat berries—you can buy them at Whole Foods—into flour), a fork or tracing wheel (the kind you can buy at any fabric store, that has little points that make holes when you roll it) to make holes in the matzo, your oven mitts, a spatula, a rolling pin, and a timer.
4. Recite the “formula of intention” specifically for making matzo: L’shem matzat mitzvah. This formula can be recited again before putting the matzos in the oven.
5. To make 4 average-sized matzos, put 1-1/2 heaping cups of flour (1-1/4 heaping cups if you’re using whole wheat flour) into your bowl. (Multiply these amounts by however many matzos you want
to make, but be aware that the dough should be constantly kneaded to slow the process of fermentation to ensure kosher-for-Passover matzos, so you’ll need lots of helping hands OR make a number of small batches, cleaning all utensils and work area thoroughly between batches.)

6. Turn your timer to 18 minutes and start it, then add 1/2 cup of cold tap water. You now have 18 minutes to get your matzo into the oven before it becomes chametz and unusable for Passover.

7. Mix the flour and water quickly and knead into a ball of dough until it is no longer sticky.

8. Split the dough into four balls and, ideally, have three other people knead each ball while either you roll out one at a time with your rolling pin, or each of the other people rolls out their ball with their own rolling pin—until you have a “pancake”-like matzo of about 1/32\text{nd} of an inch thick. Make it as thin as you can.

9. Prick holes into the matzo with either a fork or a tracing wheel (“reddler”) so that it bakes more quickly and thoroughly.

10. Lift matzos off table (you might need a spatula) and put onto pizza stone or unglazed quarry tiles in your 500-degree oven. If you want to get fancy, or you’re baking a lot at a time, you can drape them over a long wooden dowel and carry them to the oven that way, pizza-oven-style.

11. If your matzos are sufficiently thin, it should only take about 3-4 minutes to bake them, until lightly brown, and slightly more brown around the edges. They shouldn’t be soft or bendable in any way, or be folded over, or else they will not be sufficiently baked and will be considered chametz.

12. Mazel tov! You’ve just made matzo the way your tradition wanted you to make it! Enjoy these matzos at your seder table!

* This is the procedure for making the matzo itself. See other sources for how to kasher your home and utensils for Passover. If you have any questions, feel free to email me, Rabbi Benay Lappe, at Benay@svara.org.