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BLAND BREAD TURNED PASSOVER TREAT

Matzo gets a makeover

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It's only a thin cracker, usually plain and quite bland.

But matzo -- the unleavened bread eaten during Passover -- is a potent symbol of Jewish freedom that enriches people's faith over the weeklong holiday. Usually made of white flour and water, matzo is to be consumed by thousands of Jewish people across metro Detroit as Passover starts tonight.

In recent years, different versions of matzo have popped up to make it more appealing to some.

"Matzo oftentimes gets a bum rap in the Jewish community for not having much taste," said Rabbi Jason Miller of Tamarack Camps in Ortonville and Congregation T'chayah in Oak Park.

Today, stores offer a range of matzo, including increasingly popular whole-wheat and gluten-free versions, said Shlomo Goldman, owner of One Stop Kosher Market in Southfield. People also can buy chocolate-flavored matzo or matzo made of organic spelt, a type of wheat, he said. Recipe books try to liven up matzo with special dishes.

The increasing variety reflects changes in taste -- and tradition -- but ultimately, it's rooted in the same idea. "It reminds us why we were taken out of Egypt," Goldman said.

The food is rooted in Biblical history: When Jews left Egypt in haste, they had no time to let their dough rise and so it became matzo.

"Matzo has become the symbol of freedom for Jews," said Elaine Beresh, 67, of West Bloomfield. "It symbolizes the ability to live and practice all the rituals that go along with being Jewish."

In her home, Beresh eats shmura matzo, a round-shaped version made in Israel that's handmade under strict kosher supervision, starting from the moment the grains are harvested to ensure they're not contaminated. Others use the more popular square matzo made with a machine.

Their tasteless, flat nature reminds eaters of the importance of being humble. To Beresh, matzo also is about making do with what you have.

Switching to matzo instead of bread allows Jewish people to think seriously about their history and how it relates to everyday practices such as eating. "Changing our diet on the holiday of Passover ... forces us to be introspective and grateful for our freedom," Miller said.

Some use matzo to help educate children about Jewish history. At the Shul in West Bloomfield, Rabbi Kasriel Shemtov of Chabad Lubavitch helped kids deliver shmura matzo to area homes.

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