



FRANK LESLIE'S Illustrated Newspaper, 1858, showing matza baking. (Courtesy)



UNION SOLDIER J.A. Joel of the 23rd Ohio Volunteer Regiment. (Hayes Presidential Center)

## Letters from the front

Jewish soldiers serving during the American Civil War tell stories of their Passover Seders in correspondence home

• ARI GREENSPAN,  
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Wherever there are Jews, matza is to be found. Sometimes in the most unlikely of places and eras. The civil war in the United States was no exception. Jewish soldiers – like countless warriors before and after – always tried to have matza for Passover. One of the earliest historical records of post-biblical matza use is from a papyrus from 419 BCE from the Jewish military garrison in Elephantine, Egypt.

The technology of matza production began to change just before the Civil War's start in 1861. Since the exodus from Egypt, Jews simply mixed flour and water, kneaded it by hand and hurried to get it in the oven before 18 minutes had passed lest it become leavened or *hametz*. All Jews ate hand-made, thick, soft matzot, more like the *laffa*, or wrap, available in falafel shops today. Over time, the Ashkenazim developed the tradition of thinner, cracker-like Passover breads, while the Sephardim continued with the tasty soft breads. All of this began to change as the Jewish population of Europe followed the general trend of urbanization. As hundreds of thousands drifted to the big cities, the small mom-and-pop matza bakeries couldn't make enough matza for their growing communities. It was the industrial revolution that shackled modern

technology with ancient practice and the "matza machine" was invented.

Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper of 1858 shows us exactly how matza was made. The captivating image shows the process from kneading, to the hand cranked rolling machines, much like pasta makers. We see the round matza dough on the table, made with a cookie cutter of the right size. The trays of matza are put into the oven and baked. The delightful engraving shows the rabbinic supervisor, with his long coat, black top hat and a beard, observing the entire process.

As April 1865 began, the Civil War drew near conclusion. Yankee and Confederate Jews were working diligently to prepare for Passover, which began on April 10.

If the Civil War soldiers were lucky enough to get any matza, it would have been this type that they received.

Isaac Levy, a Confederate soldier in Adams Run, North Carolina, described to his sister how he and his brother Zeke observed Passover in 1864.

**'Dear Leonora,**

No doubt you were much surprised on receiving a letter from me addressed to our dear parents dated on the 21st inst [of this month] which was the first day of [Passover]. We were all under the impression in camp that the first day of the festival was the 22nd and if my memory serves me right I think that Ma wrote me that Passover was on the 22nd inst. Zeke [Isaac's

brother Capt. Ezekiel J. Levy of the 46th VA] was somewhat astonished on arriving in Charleston on Wednesday afternoon, to learn that that was the first [Seder] night. He purchased [matzot] sufficient to last us for the week. The cost is somewhat less than in Richmond, being but two dollars per pound. We are observing the festival in a truly Orthodox style. On the first day we had a fine vegetable soup. It was made of a bunch of vegetables which Zeke brought from Charleston containing new onions, parsley, carrots turnips and a young cauliflower also a pound and a half of fresh [kosher] beef, the latter article sells for four dollars per pound in Charleston. Zeke E. did not bring us any meat from home. He brought some of his own, smoked meat, which he is sharing with us, he says that he supposes that Pa forgot to deliver it to him.

The problem of fraternization of conquering Union troops in Confederate cities was a concern. Myer Levy of Philadelphia, for example, was in a Virginia town one Passover late in the war when he saw a young boy sitting on his front steps eating a piece of matza. Levy asked the boy for a piece, the child fled indoors, shouting at the top of his lungs, "Mother, there's a damn Yankee Jew outside!" The boy's mother invited Levy to the Seder that night. One wonders how the Virginian family and the Yankee soldier each understood the Haggada portions describing the evils of slavery.'

Perhaps the most interesting and colorful description is that of J.A. Joel of the 23rd Ohio Volunteer Regiment. In



1862, *The Jewish Messenger* published Joel's account of a Seder celebrated by Union soldiers in Fayette, West Virginia.

*'While lying there (near the village of Fayette, West Virginia), our camp duties were not of an arduous character, and being apprised of the approaching Feast of Passover, 20 of my comrades and coreligionists belonging to the Regiment, united in a request to our commanding officer for relief from duty, in order that we might keep the Holy Days, which he readily acceded to. The first point was gained, and, as the Paymaster had lately visited the Regiment, he had left us plenty of greenbacks. Our next business was to find some suitable person to proceed to Cincinnati, Ohio, to buy us [matzot]. Our sutler (civilian provisioner to the army post) being a coreligionist and going home to that city, readily undertook to send them. We were anxiously awaiting to receive our matzot and about the middle of the morning of [Eve of Passover] a supply train arrived in camp, and to our delight seven barrels of matzot. On opening them, we were surprised and pleased to find that our thoughtful sutler had enclosed two Haggadot and prayer-books.*

*We were now able to keep the Seder nights, if we could only obtain the other requisites for that occasion. We held a consultation and decided to send parties to forage in the country while a party stayed to build a log hut for the services. About the middle of the afternoon the foragers arrived, having been quite successful. We obtained two kegs of cider, a lamb, several chickens and some eggs. Horseradish or parsley we could not obtain, but in lieu we found a weed, whose bitterness, I apprehend, exceeded anything our forefathers "enjoyed." [...] The necessities for the haroset we could not obtain, so we got a brick which, rather hard to digest, reminded us, by looking at it, for what purpose it was intended. At dark we had all prepared, and were ready to commence the service. There being no "hazan" present, I was selected to read the services, which I commenced by asking the blessing of the Almighty on the food before us, and to preserve our lives from danger. The ceremonies were passing off very nicely, until we arrived at the part where the bitter herb was to be taken. We all had a large portion of the herb ready to eat at the moment I said the blessing; each eat his portion, when horrors! what a scene ensued in our little congregation, it is impossible for my pen to describe. The herb was very bitter and very fiery like Cayenne pepper, and excited our thirst to such a degree, that we forgot the law authorizing us to drink only four cups, and the consequence was we drank up all the cider.'*

THE FIRST step in the culmination of the war was the fall of the Confederate capital Richmond, Virginia, on April 3, 1865. That was followed on April 9 with the signing of the peace agreement between Grant and Lee at the Appomattox, Virginia, courthouse. Lincoln had been anxiously awaiting this victory to end the bloody war of four years in which 600,000 people were killed, civilian and military.

The treaty was concluded the day before Passover and the journalists captured that theme. *The New York Herald* reported. "As the forefathers of the Jews passed over the Red Sea at the time of which this festival is the anniversary so also the American people passed over and beyond the red sea of blood which has been split so freely during the last four years."

The *Boston Daily Advertiser* explicitly pointed to "the coincidence that the modern people of bondage [Southern slaves] have seen their deliverance confirmed and nearly consummated, about the same season of the year [as Passover] and from what we have seen of their bearing and understanding of the event they are not unlikely to regard its anniversary with equal reverence."

Sadly, on Friday night, April 14, the Shabbat of the intermediate days of the holiday and Good Friday, Lincoln was assassinated by John Wilkes Booth.

On Shabbat morning, as Rabbi Elkan Cohn mounted his pulpit at the Sutter Street synagogue in San Francisco, he received a cable. Visibly moved, he prayed: "Who might believe it! Our revered president Abraham Lincoln, the twice-anointed high priest in the sanctuary of our Republic, has fallen a bloody victim to treason and assassination, and is no more."

"The assassination rapidly turned Lincoln into a Jewish saint," biographer Jonathan Sarna emphasizes. "By that Passover 1865 he had won the war, overturned the expulsion of Jews by Grant and ensured that Jews could be chaplains in the Union army. Northerners and Jews in Yankee land were devastated by his death. Even though Confederate Jews not as moved by his death, Lincoln still became the Moses unable to enter the land of peace."



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From a small electronics workshop that has grown and evolved over the years, "Fuse" has become one of the leading and most professional stereo stores in Israel. With dependable professional service, uncompromising sound quality and an exclusive buying experience, one can understand why.

Further details at: [www.fuse.co.il](http://www.fuse.co.il)

These days we are constantly upgrading our cars, renovating our apartments, and changing our stereo units every few years. Those of us who still remember how stereo units "in the old days" sounded will be happy to discover that in Givatayim "Fuse" is continuing the tradition of quality sound. They offer a range of stereos, home theater systems, turntables, projectors, TV screens and accessories, along with a second hand department and service department.

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As well as daily activities, Fuse provides an exclusive experience: The store has two professional demonstration rooms with a staggering choice of amps and speakers and a Hi-End room with special

acoustic walls of wood, making it possible to listen to all the sound system features in comfort. When you enter the demonstration room, it's as if you are in a new world: welcome to the world of stereo and quality sound!

The purchasing experience, which usually involves a few words of recommendation and a catalog, becomes at Fuse a sense-heightening experience, making it possible to try out different sound quality in maximal acoustic surroundings. "The individual demonstrations should be booked in advance, as the caller can explain his needs over the phone, and we will combine the components for him. Building a stereo system is an uncompromising process, combining all the needs of the buyer/client," explains Bubliil. During the demo the buyer/client can receive advice from one of the experts on staff at the store, or the opposite, as the system is built to personal taste. As well as the latest systems one can find rare items such as tube amplifiers of the old kind, which have been remaindered from the amp market, and are having new popularity because of their sound quality and new and old turntables treasured for their calming, natural tones. Many musicians, who visit the store frequently, describe this as the closest to hearing a live performance.

The store works with leading world brands such as B&W, YAMAHA, ROTEL, QUAD, NAD, MUSICAL FIDELITY, PROAC, DALI, FOCAL, THORENS, and many more good quality brands.

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