Why Do We Eat Matzah in the Spring?

To mark the new year of grain and ensure the bountiful wheat harvest to come. But why do we remove all our *chametz* (leaven)?

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The year itself has no beginning and end; seasons change gradually, and without a calendar, nothing would mark any given season or day as the beginning of a new year. Nevertheless, humans want to mark years and so, around the world, calendars do so by choosing a particular time as the beginning of a new year.

The ancient Near East, including ancient Israel, demarcated two (main) new year seasons. These are both reflected in the Akkadian month names, adopted by the Judeans after the Babylonian exile:

**Autumn – Tishrei**: *Tašrītu* – from the Akkadian *šurrû*, meaning “beginning.” In the Mediterranean, autumn starts a new cycle of sowing, seeding, and hoping for the first rain to come.

**Spring – Nissan**: *Nissanu*– from the Akkadian word for “first-produce.”[1] The Mediterranean spring starts with the birth of newborn kids in the flock and the cutting of the first crops.[2]

Autumn Calendar

Since rabbinic times, Jews have celebrated the first of Tishrei as Rosh Hashanah, “ the beginning [lit. head] of the year.”[3] Although Leviticus (23:24) and Numbers (29:1) refer to this day as the first day of the seventh month, other biblical texts imply that the Israelites marked this autumn season, when one agricultural cycle ends and another one begins, with a new year festival.[4]

The Covenant Collection describes the holiday of Asif (Ingathering, known elsewhere as Sukkot) as:

שמות כג:יג וְחַ֤ג הָֽאָסִף֙ **בְּצֵ֣את הַשָּׁנָ֔ה** בְּאָסְפְּךָ֥ אֶֽת־מַעֲשֶׂ֖יךָ מִן־הַשָּׂדֶֽה׃

Exod 23:13 The Feast of Ingathering (חג האסיף) **at the end of the year**, when you gather in the results of your work from the field.[5]

It is the time when the process of gathering summer fruit, particularly grapes, comes to culmination.[6] This is also the time when the land is going to be seeded, and the farmers hope for the first rains to come, “the rain in its season, rains that bring blessing” (הַגֶּשֶׁם בְּעִתּוֹ גִּשְׁמֵי בְרָכָה יִהְיוּ; Ezek 34:26); this is why prayers for water are so central to Sukkot.[7]

The autumn festival was the time chosen (or remembered) for the dedication of the Jerusalem temple, the house of God (1 Kings 8:1-5)—this too reflects its importance.[8] Elsewhere in the ancient Near east, the ritual of a divine enthronement was closely tied to an autumn New Year festival.[9]

Spring Calendar

Despite the agricultural and cultural supports for an autumn new year found in the ancient Near East, the “official” dating system in the Torah, reflected in the Priestly Text and the Torah’s final editors, is the spring calendar.

Months are numbered in the Torah from what we now call Nissan, and Exodus 12:2 states explicitly that the spring calendar is the proper way of counting:

‏‎שמות יב:ב הַחֹ֧דֶשׁ הַזֶּ֛ה לָכֶ֖ם רֹ֣אשׁ חֳדָשִׁ֑ים רִאשׁ֥וֹן הוּא֙ לָכֶ֔ם לְחָדְשֵׁ֖י הַשָּׁנָֽה׃

Exod 12:2 This month shall mark for you the beginning of the months; it shall be the first of the months of the year for you.

As noted above, spring is when newborn animals are born to the flocks and when crops planted in the autumn and early winter first appear. Each of these significant occasions was marked with an appropriate ritual.

Pesach for Flocks

The Torah describes the paschal offering that is to be offered at this time of the year:

שמות פרק יב:ג …וְיִקְח֣וּ לָהֶ֗ם אִ֛ישׁ שֶׂ֥ה לְבֵית־אָבֹ֖ת שֶׂ֥ה לַבָּֽיִת... יב:ה שֶׂ֥ה תָמִ֛ים זָכָ֥ר בֶּן־שָׁנָ֖ה יִהְיֶ֣ה לָכֶ֑ם מִן־הַכְּבָשִׂ֥ים וּמִן־הָעִזִּ֖ים תִּקָּֽחוּ: יב:ו ...וְשָׁחֲט֣וּ אֹת֗וֹ כֹּ֛ל קְהַ֥ל עֲדַֽת־ יִשְׂרָאֵ֖ל בֵּ֥ין הָעַרְבָּֽיִם: יב:ז וְלָֽקְחוּ֙ מִן־הַדָּ֔ם וְנָֽתְנ֛וּ עַל־שְׁתֵּ֥י הַמְּזוּזֹ֖ת וְעַל־הַמַּשְׁק֑וֹף עַ֚ל הַבָּ֣תִּ֔ים אֲשֶׁר־יֹאכְל֥וּ אֹת֖וֹ בָּהֶֽם:

Exod 12:3 …Each of them shall take a lamb to a family, a lamb to a household... 12:5 Your lamb shall be without blemish, a yearling male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. 12:6 ...and all the assembled congregation of the Israelites shall slaughter it at twilight. 12:7 They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they are to eat it.

In the Torah, the Israelites perform this ritual in Egypt, to protect their firstborn sons from being killed during the final plague. Moses then tells them to keep this ritual every year as a memorial (Exod 12:24).

Even so, most scholars assume that the ritual predates its association with the exodus and should instead be traced back to the Israelites’ past as shepherding nomads. As spring is the season during which baby animals are born, sacrificing an animal functions as a rite of protection for the rest of the flock: it was meant to secure the new year’s dairy, wool, and meat.[10]

Matzot for Harvest

Another ritual the Torah commands during the spring season is the seven-day Festival of Matzot (“Unleavened Bread”; חג המצות), during which only *matzot* may be eaten and all leaven (*chametz*; חמץ) must be removed from the home.[11] These rituals had an agricultural meaning, tied to Israel’s harvest seasons.

Barley and Wheat Harvest Seasons

In the Levant, two harvest seasons followed one after another, the barley harvest and then the wheat harvest. In the Gezer Calendar’s list of seasons, for instance, the month of harvesting barley (ירח קצר שערם) is followed by “the month of harvesting and measuring” (ירח קציר וכל), which must refer to the wheat harvest; as the most important crop, the wheat harvest was designated through the general term of “harvesting.”

The Sumerian and Akkadian names for these months make their connection to the two sequential harvests clear.

* **Adar**in Sumerian is [*iti*] *še-sag̃11-ku5*,[12] “[the month of] cutting barley.”
* **Nissanu** in Akkadian means “first produce” likely referring to the “first produce” of the primary crop, wheat, which began to ripen during the following month.

The order of an initial barley harvest followed by wheat stand behind this description of the hail plague in Exodus:

שמות ט:לא וְהַפִּשְׁתָּ֥ה וְהַשְּׂעֹרָ֖ה נֻכָּ֑תָה כִּ֤י **הַשְּׂעֹרָה֙** אָבִ֔יב וְהַפִּשְׁתָּ֖ה גִּבְעֹֽל: לא:לב **וְהַחִטָּ֥ה**וְהַכֻּסֶּ֖מֶת לֹ֣א נֻכּ֑וּ כִּ֥י אֲפִילֹ֖ת הֵֽנָּה:

Exod 9:31 Now the flax and barley were ruined, for the **barley** was in the ear and the flax was in bud; 9:32 but the **wheat** and the emmer were not hurt, for they ripen late.

The book of Ruth also confirms this order:

רות ב:כג וַתִּדְבַּ֞ק בְּנַעֲר֥וֹת בֹּ֙עַז֙ לְלַקֵּ֔ט עַד־כְּל֥וֹת **קְצִֽיר־הַשְּׂעֹרִ֖ים וּקְצִ֣יר הַֽחִטִּ֑ים**…

Ruth 2:23 So she stayed close to the maidservants of Boaz, and gleaned until **the barley harvest and the wheat harvest** were finished…[13]

As the festival of Qatzir (or Shavuot) marks the wheat harvest (Exod 34:22), Matzot, which comes a few weeks before, marks the barley harvest.[14]

In fact, the simple meaning of the word *matzah*, the eating of which is this holiday’s central ritual, is barley flatbread.[15] Barley was generally not leavened with yeast since the main benefit of such leavening is to make the dough rise and produce a loaf, but this cannot be done with barley, which only yields flatbreads.[16]

Eating Barley Flatbread and Parched Wheat in Aviv

Despite its connection to barley, I would argue that the Festival of Matzot was not primarily a celebration of the barley harvest. Instead, its rituals are focused on the upcoming wheat harvest.

During the early spring, when barley was ripe and ready for baking into flatbreads, the unripe, green ears of wheat would begin to appear. The word in Hebrew for these green ears is “aviv” [17] (אביב), and the Torah more than once emphasizes that the festival of Matzot should take place “in the month of Aviv,”[18] i.e., “the month the green (unripe) ears [of wheat].”

The *aviv* period of wheat lasts a number of weeks and thus, while the Israelites waited for the new wheat to fully ripen and then dry, they could supplement their diet of barley flatbreads with this unripe, green wheat.

Parched Grains – *Qalui* and Freekeh

When grain is harvested green, it must be parched, i.e., burned in fire, before eating, so as to separate the wheat from the chaff, a process the Bible calls *qalui* (קלוי). See, for example, the instructions for an individual’s meal offering of the “first produce” (Lev 2:14) note:

ויקרא ב:יד וְאִם־תַּקְרִ֛יב מִנְחַ֥ת בִּכּוּרִ֖ים לַי-הוָ֑ה **אָבִ֞יב** **קָל֤וּי בָּאֵשׁ֙**גֶּ֣רֶשׂ כַּרְמֶ֔ל תַּקְרִ֕יב אֵ֖ת מִנְחַ֥ת בִּכּוּרֶֽיךָ׃

Lev 2:14 If you bring a meal offering of first produce to YHWH, you shall bring **new ears** **parched with fire**, grits of the fresh grain, as your meal offering of first fruits. [19]

Even as a sacrifice to God, the green grain is to be offered “parched” (קלוי) as the grain would have been eaten.

The process is still used today to make the Arab dish known as freekeh[20] (فريكة), which is made from durum wheat harvested while the grains are green and the seeds soft. After drying the wheat, it is burned to remove the chaff, while the green seeds do not burn because they are still moist. Green wheat, however, cannot be used for making bread, since it is too low in gluten, which is needed to make bread rise.

*Matzot* and Parched Wheat Together

The seasonal connection between consuming *matzot* and parched grains is explicit in Joshua 5:11, which describes the Israelites eating both on the day after Pesach (what is in other places described as the Festival of Matzot):

יהושע ה:יא וַיֹּ֨אכְל֜וּ מֵעֲב֥וּר הָאָ֛רֶץ מִמָּֽחֳרַ֥ת הַפֶּ֖סַח **מַצּ֣וֹת וְקָל֑וּי** בְּעֶ֖צֶם הַיּ֥וֹם הַזֶּֽה׃

Josh 5:11 On the day after the paschal offering, on that very day, they ate of the produce of the country, **unleavened bread and parched grain**.

In short, unleavened barley flatbreads and parched wheat are the staple for this immediate post-Pesach season, since this is what would be available to eat. Bread would be unavailable for another few weeks, until the ripe wheat was harvested, dried, and leavened.

Marking the Period Between Barley and Wheat

In years of plenty, the Israelite silos would have had enough wheat in storage to bake bread until the next wheat harvest, as we see from the description of extreme prosperity at the end of Leviticus:

ויקרא כו:י וַאֲכַלְתֶּ֥ם יָשָׁ֖ן נוֹשָׁ֑ן וְיָשָׁ֕ן מִפְּנֵ֥י חָדָ֖שׁ תּוֹצִֽיאוּ:

Lev 26:10 You shall eat old grain long stored, and you shall have to clear out the old to make room for the new.

In harder times, however, the Israelites would have been lucky to have enough wheat stored to last until the barley season, at which point, they would only have barley flatbread (*matzot*).

I suggest, therefore, that the practice of not eating bread during this period even in years of plenty, and instead eating only *matzot*, was meant to mark the liminal period between the end of the barley harvest and the beginning of the wheat harvest.[21]

Removing Leavening Agents for a Fresh Start

Part of marking this shift was the requirement to start fresh by actively removing or destroying all leaven and leavening agents (שְּׂאֹר; *se’or*) in one’s possession:

שמות יב:טו שִׁבְעַ֤ת יָמִים֙ מַצּ֣וֹת תֹּאכֵ֔לוּ אַ֚ךְ בַּיּ֣וֹם הָרִאשׁ֔וֹן **תַּשְׁבִּ֥יתוּ שְּׂאֹ֖ר מִבָּתֵּיכֶ֑ם** כִּ֣י׀ כָּל אֹכֵ֣ל חָמֵ֗ץ וְנִכְרְתָ֞ה הַנֶּ֤פֶשׁ הַהִוא֙ מִיִּשְׂרָאֵ֔ל מִיּ֥וֹם הָרִאשֹׁ֖ן עַד י֥וֹם הַשְּׁבִעִֽי:

Exod 12:15 Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread; on the very first day **you shall remove leaven from your houses**, for whoever eats leavened bread from the first day to the seventh day, that person shall be cut off from Israel.[22]

Until about 150 years ago, the standard way of leavening bread was by using a starter from previously fermenting dough (sourdough), a process first discovered in Egypt about 6000 years ago.[23] Sourdough is produced through natural fermentation, when flour and water are exposed to yeast as well as what today we recognize as lactobacilli bacteria.[24]

It takes about a week for flour and water set outside to absorb enough naturally occurring yeast to rise;[25] this is a long time to wait for bread. For this reason, sourdough, already fermented dough, was kept and used to ferment the next batch of dough much more quickly.

According to the Torah’s commandment to remove all leavening agents from one’s home, the Israelites would have had to *destroy* their supply of sourdough and start the process of fermentation all over again from scratch with the new wheat.

Privation Ritual

Starting fresh by destroying all leavening agents and eating only barley flatbreads until the next wheat harvest did more than just mark the new year, it also functioned as a privation ritual, in which the Israelites would mimic the practice of a bad year by living as if they had no wheat in stock. Doing so was a way of ritually ensuring that the wheat harvest would also go “properly,” and the coming year’s bread supply would be secure.

Enacting a small amount of controlled privation or destruction is a standard element of protection rituals, a classic example being the requirement to “afflict oneself” on Yom Kippur to avoid further divine punishments.

The Spring New Year for Shepherds and Farmers

The practice of eating only barley flatbreads on the Festival of Matzot to ensure a good harvest parallels the sacrifice of an animal on Pesach to ensure the health of the herd. The ancient Israelites were a polymorphic society, meaning that they had settled farms and moderate-sized herds. The spring season was an important time for both of these groups, as the newborn animals and the new wheat crop were both arriving. The dual celebrations of Pesach and Matzot were a way for Israelites shepherds and farmers to each mark the new beginning that spring offered and do what they could to ensure that the coming year would be a bountiful one.

[View Footnotes](https://www.thetorah.com/article/why-do-we-eat-matzah-in-the-spring)

1. The Akkadian likely derives from the Sumerian word, *nisag̃*, with the same meaning. But in Sumerian, the month had a different name, [*iti*] *barag.zag.gar.ra*, meaning “[the month of] the dais of the sanctuary.” Nissan is only mentioned in *Tanach* in the Persian period books of Esther and Ezra-Nehemiah (Esther 3:7 and Neh 2:1); Tishrei is never mentioned in *Tanach*.
2. Other calendars, such as the Gregorian calendar commence with the winter, in hope for the growing light and warmth. The rabbis try to settle contradicting information in the *Tanach*regarding the time of new year by setting forth an array of new years with different foci (m. *Rosh Hashanah* 1:1):

ארבעה ראשי שנים הם.

There are four New Years.

**באחד בניסן** ראש השנה למלכים ולרגלים.

**On the first of Nissan** is the New Year regarding kings and the Festivals.

**באחד באלול** ראש השנה למעשר בהמה. רבי אלעזר ורבי שמעון אומרים, באחד בתשרי.

**On the first of Ellul** is the New Year for the tithing of the cattle. Rabbi Elazar and Rabbi Shimon say: on the first of Tishrei.

**באחד בתשרי** ראש השנה לשנים ולשמיטין וליובלות, לנטיעה ולירקות.

**On the first of Tishrei** is the New Year for years of, for the *shemittah*(seventh) year and the jubilee year count, for planting and for vegetables.

**באחד בשבט**, ראש השנה לאילן, כדברי בית שמאי. בית הלל אומרים, בחמשה עשר בו.

**On the first of Shevat** is the New Year for trees according to the words of the School of Shammai, but the School of Hillel say: It is on the fifteenth of the month.

This text presents us with unique flexibility regarding the definition of a new year.

1. For more on the development of Rosh Hashana, see the TABS Editors, “[Rosh Hashanah Between Tanach and Mishna,](https://thetorah.com/rosh-hashanah-between-tanach-and-mishna/)” *TheTorah.com* (2013).
2. For a review of the sources and influences of Sukkot see Zev Farber, “The Origins of Sukkot,” *TheTorah.com* (2017).
3. Nevertheless, Exodus 34:22 describes it as “the turn of the year” possibly implying that this text is working with a spring calendar and that, in his conception, Asif is in the middle of the year and not the end.
4. Others argue that Asif celebrates not the *end* of the fruit gathering but the *beginning* of the olive gathering, which is done in late autumn. See, Oded Borowski, *Daily Life in Biblical Times* (Atlanta: SBL, 2003), 28; Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (Library of Ancient Israel; Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 88. Nevertheless, I find it difficult to understand Asif, which occurs at the “*end* of the year,” as the *beginning* of a season.
5. For more on this, see Zev Farber, [“Water Libation: A Sukkot Rain Making Ritual,”](http://thetorah.com/water-libation-a-sukkot-rain-making-ritual/) *TheTorah.com* (2015).

אָ֣ז יַקְהֵ֣ל שְׁלֹמֹ֣ה אֶת־זִקְנֵ֣י יִשְׂרָאֵ֡ל אֶת־כָּל־רָאשֵׁ֣י הַמַּטּוֹת֩ נְשִׂיאֵ֨י הָאָב֜וֹת לִבְנֵ֧י יִשְׂרָאֵ֛ל אֶל־הַמֶּ֥לֶךְ שְׁלֹמֹ֖ה יְרוּשָׁלִָ֑ם לְֽהַעֲל֞וֹת אֶת־אֲר֧וֹן בְּרִית־יְהוָ֛ה מֵעִ֥יר דָּוִ֖ד הִ֥יא צִיּֽוֹן׃ וַיִּקָּ֨הֲל֜וּ אֶל־הַמֶּ֤לֶךְ שְׁלֹמֹה֙ כָּל־אִ֣ישׁ יִשְׂרָאֵ֔ל בְּיֶ֥רַח הָאֵֽתָנִ֖ים בֶּחָ֑ג ה֖וּא הַחֹ֥דֶשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִֽי׃

Then Solomon convoked the elders of Israel—all the heads of the tribes and the ancestral chieftains of the Israelites—before King Solomon in Jerusalem, to bring up the Ark of the Covenant of YHWH from the City of David, that is, Zion. All the men of Israel gathered before King Solomon at the Feast, in the month of Etanim—that is, the seventh month.

Although the text parses the date as being in the seventh month and not the first, this seems to be a Deuteronomistic (or even post-Dtr) redaction, to explain the no longer familiar reference to “Month of Etanim.” For some expansion on Sukkot as a dedication festival, see Yael Avrahami, [“The Biblical Building Blocks of Chanukah,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/the-biblical-building-blocks-of-chanukah) *TheTorah.com* (2014).

1. See Uri Gabbay, “[Babylonian Rosh Hashanah,](http://thetorah.com/babylonian-rosh-hashanah/)”*TheTorah.com* (2015). For a detailed look at ancient calendars, see Sacha Stern, *Calendars in Antiquity: Empires, States, and Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).
2. For a slightly different approach, seeing the Pesach as an apotropaic ritual to protect the household, see Kristine Garroway, [“The Origins of the Biblical Pesach,”](https://thetorah.com/origins-of-the-biblical-pesach/) *TheTorah.com*(2015); William H.C. Propp, *Exodus 1-18* (Anchor Yale Bible; Yale University Press, 2010 [orig. Doubleday, 1999]), 434-444, 457.
3. See Exod 23:15; 34:18; Lev 23:6; Deut 16:16; Ezra 6:22; 2 Chron 8:13; 30:13, 21. The name פסח is associated with the sacrifice and sometimes the one-day holiday on which the sacrifice was held. In the Bible, Pesach and the Festival of Matzot are not coterminous, though over time they came to be. See discussion in, Michael Satlow, [“Passover and the Festival of Matzot: Synthesizing Two Holidays,”](https://thetorah.com/passover-and-the-festival-of-matzot/) *TheTorah.com* (2014).
4. Alternatively transcribed as *še-kin-kud*or *še-gur10-kud*.
5. When discussing “harvest times” (*qatzir*; קציר), the Torah sometimes specifies “barley harvest” (קציר שערים) or “wheat harvest” (קציר חטים), but often leaves the term general. For example, whereas Exodus 23:16 enjoins a harvest holiday (חג הקציר), without specifying what is being harvested, Exodus 34:22 clarifies that this holiday celebrates the wheat harvest.
6. Again, I am putting aside the “historical” explanation of *matzot* being eating because of the exodus. For more on how that idea developed, see Zev Farber, [“How Eating Matzot Became Part of the Exodus Story,”](https://thetorah.com/how-eating-matzot-became-part-of-the-exodus-story/) *TheTorah.com* (2018).
7. HALOT offers the first meaning of מצה is “type of flat bread, baked quickly from barley meal and water, with unleavened dough.”
8. Michael Pollan*, Cooked: A Natural History of Transformation* (New York: Penguin, 2013), 225. The archaeological evidence from el-Amarna demonstrated that Emmer wheat was used for bread. William Rubel, *Bread: A Global History* (Edible; London: Reaktion Books, 2011), 28. For detailed discussion of baking in ancient Egypt see Samuel Delwen. “Their staff of life: initial investigations on ancient Egyptian bread baking,” in *Amarna Reports* V (London: Egypt Exploration Society, 1989), 253-290.
9. The word *aviv* is etymologically linked to the word אֵב that refers to the young green plants (Job 8:12) and spring blooming in general (Song 6:11). In Modern Hebrew the word *aviv* means “spring (season).”
10. See, for example:

שמות כג:טו אֶת־חַ֣ג הַמַּצּוֹת֘ תִּשְׁמֹר֒ שִׁבְעַ֣ת יָמִים֩ תֹּאכַ֨ל מַצּ֜וֹת כַּֽאֲשֶׁ֣ר צִוִּיתִ֗ךָ **לְמוֹעֵד֙ חֹ֣דֶשׁ הָֽאָבִ֔יב** כִּי־ב֖וֹ יָצָ֣אתָ מִמִּצְרָ֑יִם…

Exod 23:15 You shall observe the Feast of Matzot – eating unleavened bread for seven days as I have commanded you – **at the set time in the month (or “new moon”) of Aviv**, for in it you went forth from Egypt…

שמות לד:יח אֶת־חַ֣ג הַמַּצּוֹת֘ תִּשְׁמֹר֒ שִׁבְעַ֨ת יָמִ֜ים תֹּאכַ֤ל מַצּוֹת֙ אֲשֶׁ֣ר צִוִּיתִ֔ךָ **לְמוֹעֵ֖ד חֹ֣דֶשׁ הָאָבִ֑יב** כִּ֚י בְּחֹ֣דֶשׁ הָֽאָבִ֔יב יָצָ֖אתָ מִמִּצְרָֽיִם:

Exod 34:18 You shall observe the Feast of Matzot – eating unleavened bread for seven days, as I have commanded you – **at the set time of the month (or “new moon”) of Aviv**, for in the month (or “new moon”) of Aviv you went forth from Egypt.

See also Exod 13:4. In contrast, Deut 16:1 ties Aviv into the paschal offering.

1. *Aviv* can refer to any grain that is still green and not ready for harvest, See, for example, the reference to the Egyptian barley that was still green (Exod 9:31): “the barley was in the ear” (הַשְּׂעֹרָה֙ אָבִ֔יב). It is therefore, unclear whether the meal offering should be from barley or wheat. If this *bikkurim* is connected to the Festival of Bikkurim (also called Shavuot or Qatzir), then it is likely a reference to wheat, since this holiday celebrated the wheat harvest. Nevertheless, this offering of parched grain seems quite different than that of baked leavened bread offering referenced in Lev 23:17 with regard to Festival of Bikkurim. Alternatively, the *bikkurim* here could be connected to the *omer* offering (as the Rabbis assume; see Rashi *ad loc.*), which was from barley. In support of this latter possibility, see 2 Kings 4:42:

‎ וְאִ֙ישׁ בָּ֜א מִבַּ֣עַל שָׁלִ֗שָׁה וַיָּבֵא֩ לְאִ֙ישׁ הָאֱלֹהִ֜ים **לֶ֤חֶם בִּכּוּרִים ֙**עֶשְׂרִֽים־**לֶ֣חֶם שְׂעֹרִ֔ים** וְכַרְמֶ֖ל בְּצִקְלֹנ֑וֹ וַיֹּ֕אמֶר תֵּ֥ן לָעָ֖ם וְיֹאכֵֽלוּ׃

A man came from Baal-shalishah and he brought the man of God some **bread of the first reaping** — twenty loaves of **barley bread**, and some fresh grain in his sack. And [Elisha] said, “Give it to the people and let them eat.”

This text explicitly refers to *bikkurim* bread as “barley bread.”

1. In Arabic, the root *p.r.k* means “to rub”; in Aramaic, the same root in adjective form can mean “dry” or “brittle,” and is used to describe nuts or seeds with easily removable shells. See the entries for “פרך” in Marcus Jastrow, *Dictionary of Targumim, The Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi and the Midrashic Literature* (Leipzig: Drugulin Oriental Printer, 1903), 1228-1229.
2. This desire to officially divide the new year’s crops from those of the previous year is the explicit purpose of the “sheave (*omer*) offering,” which was made from the first stalks of barley harvested that year. According to Leviticus, before this offering was brought, the Israelites were forbidden from consuming the new produce:

ויקראו כג:י…כִּֽי־תָבֹ֣אוּ אֶל־הָאָ֗רֶץ אֲשֶׁ֤ר אֲנִי֙ נֹתֵ֣ן לָכֶ֔ם וּקְצַרְתֶּ֖ם אֶת־קְצִירָ֑הּ וַהֲבֵאתֶ֥ם אֶת־עֹ֛מֶר רֵאשִׁ֥ית קְצִירְכֶ֖ם אֶל־הַכֹּהֵֽן…כג:יד וְלֶחֶם֩ וְקָלִ֨י וְכַרְמֶ֜ל לֹ֣א תֹֽאכְל֗וּ עַד־עֶ֙צֶם֙ הַיּ֣וֹם הַזֶּ֔ה עַ֚ד הֲבִ֣יאֲכֶ֔ם אֶת־קָרְבַּ֖ן אֱלֹהֵיכֶ֑ם…

Lev 23:10…When you enter the land that I am giving to you and you reap its harvest, you shall bring the first sheaf of your harvest to the priest… 23:14 Until that very day, until you have brought the offering of your God, you shall eat no bread or parched grain or fresh ears…

Offering the first cut of barley was a way of ritually marking the new year’s crops.

1. See also Exod 13:3, 7 and Deut 16:3-4.
2. Pollan*, Cooked,*207. Before this, Egyptians and Sumerians used beer yeast, but could only produce flat-leavened bread. The discovery of sourdough paved the way to loaf baking. Rubel, *Bread*, 17.
3. Pollan*, Cooked,*219.
4. Sandor Ellix Katz, *Wild Fermentation: The Flavor, Nutrition, and Craft of Live-Culture Foods* 2nd Edition (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2016), Kindle Locations 2691-2692.