



REMOVING THE CHAMETZ OF STRANGE GODS

By Rabbi Moshe ben Asher, Ph.D. & Magidah Khulda bat Sarah

Two of the best-known aspects of Passover are the liberation and exodus from Egypt and the prohibition against eating leavened foods during the days of the festival—which prompt us to ask two related questions:

1. Do you believe that our ancestors were slaves in Egypt and then were liberated and received the Torah at Mount Sinai?
2. Do you believe that there is *not* any compelling reason to follow the commandment to remove all *chametz* from your possession during Passover? (You may, of course, answer this question in the affirmative even if you're not sure what *chametz* is exactly.)

If you answer “yes” to both of these questions, you're in a very large company of contemporary American Jews. On the one hand, most of us accept the traditional understanding of our people's *past history*, especially the liberation and exodus from Egypt, although there's virtually no extra-biblical evidence to support those particular events. On the other hand, most of us reject what the tradition teaches is required to ensure our *future history*.

We'll return momentarily to the connection between the future of the Jewish people and removing *chametz*. But first it may be helpful to clarify the characteristics of *chametz* and its place in Jewish tradition.

Chametz, described most simply, is fermented dough. When a leavening agent, such as yeast, is added to dough, it's called *lechem chametz* or leavened bread. In addition, five types of grain—wheat,

barley, spelt, rye, and oats—are considered as *chametz* because they ferment when decomposing from contact with moisture.

As a precaution, the Ashkenazi rabbis classified and proscribed legumes, such as beans and peas, as *chametz*. They long ago recognized the possibility of confusing flour made from legumes and that made from grains, and that it's also possible that the prohibited grains could be inadvertently ground up with legumes.

A very different reason for the *minhag* (custom) of prohibiting legumes has been offered by Rabbi David Golinkin, President, Rector, and Professor of Jewish Law at the Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem: “The custom of not eating *kitniyot* [legumes] was linked not to Pessah but to all holidays. *Kitniyot* were considered the simple food of the poor, and lentils especially were the food of mourners. This was true in ancient Rome, and Austria and Germany in the Middle Ages. Therefore, in order to keep the festive nature of the holidays, *kitniyot* were prohibited.” Incidentally, the only flour that is acceptable for Ashkenazi Jews to use on Passover is made from matzah or potato; Sephardim use rice flour.

The Torah commands that, “Seven days [or eight in the Diaspora] you shall eat matzos, and on the seventh day there shall be a festival to Adoshem. Matzos shall be eaten for the seven days, and *chametz* will not be seen with you and leaven will not be seen with you in all your borders.” (Exodus 13:6-7)

We are directed to search out *chametz* from every corner of our home, not only to remove all *chametz* from our premises but also to nullify it in our mind, to consider that which inadvertently remains in our possession as if it were dust.

But why root out *chametz*? What does *chametz* symbolize according to our tradition?

In *The Guide to the Perplexed* (3:46), Maimonides notes that the Torah prohibition of *chametz* on the altar of the ancient Temple in Jerusalem reflects antipathy to the paganism then extant: “Due to the fact that the idolaters would sacrifice only leavened bread, and they would offer up all manner of sweet food and would smear their animal sacrifices with honey . . . therefore God warned us not to offer to Him any of these things, leaven or honey.”

In the *Zohar* we read the teaching of Rabbi Shimon: “*Seor* [leavening agent], *chametz*, and *mahmezeth* [leavened bread] all mean one and the same thing, and are symbols of . . . the powers appointed to represent all the other nations, which are . . . termed variously ‘evil imagination,’ ‘foreign domination,’ ‘strange god,’ and ‘other gods’.” (*Zohar*, Shemoth 2:40a)

Elsewhere in the *Zohar* we read: “Passover is the time for the decision with regard to cereals, because on Passover Israel began to enter into the holy portion of the Almighty and to remove from themselves the leaven which symbolizes the powers who are appointed over the idol-worshipping nations and who are called ‘strange gods’.” (*Zohar*, Bereshith 1:226b) The *Zohar* also teaches us that, “‘Leaven’ and ‘unleaven’ symbolize the evil and the good inclinations in humankind.” (*Zohar*, Shemoth, Raya Mehemna, 40b)

Returning to the question of *chametz* and our future, we may ask: Why bother removing *chametz* from our diet and domicile for eight days every year?

The Jewish idea and historical experience is that spiritual death foreshadows physical death, although certainly that experience isn’t limited to the Jews. The classic case, of course, is the decline of Rome, which is always associated in our minds with its moral degeneration.

At the end of our fifty-eighth century, it’s arguably true that although Israel has been reestablished, the Jewish people are still in spiritual exile. Causeless hatred between Jews of different persuasions has become the hallmark of social and political life in Israel. In the Diaspora, a tidal wave of secularism has washed over the Jewish people—the majority has abandoned Judaism. For many of those who remain religious, the hallmark of their religiosity is the personal spiritual quest, as evidenced by the extraordinary publishing bonanza of Jewish books on meditation and Kabbalah, often at the expense of commitment to congregational community.

But our spirituality, our holiness, is directly proportional to our living communally in the image of God—together conquering our bad inclinations and nurturing our good ones. Our Sages understood that, “It is human nature for a person not to see his own *chametz* and sourdough, that is, his personal faults and bad habits. . . . [and] nothing is easier than seeing other people’s shortcomings. And in particular, people are accustomed to pay the minutest attention to any shortcomings in ‘what belongs to the Divine’: *talmidei hakhamim* [Talmud scholars] and *tzaddikim* [righteous persons].” (*Yeinah Shel Torah*, Toldot Ya’akov Yitzchak) If we are to raise our spiritual condition, to return from exile as it were, we must begin to see in ourselves that which separates us as a people from the divine—which in our tradition is represented by *chametz*.

So during the week of Passover we recall how together we came out of Egypt and for what purpose. We entered a covenant that has sustained us as a people for more than 3,000 years; so we take pains now to remind ourselves of what is required to assure our future history as the Jewish people.

We are taught to search out and forego the *chametz* in our lives, to look within ourselves for the “foreign gods” and “evil imagination” that keep us in spiritual exile. And we symbolically root them out as we remove the *chametz*, which we replace with the matzah that sustained us in our liberation.

Click [here](#) for more congregational development and organizing tools.

Help support the work of *Gather the People* with a tax-deductible donation by clicking [here](#)!