



Digging DEEPER

In search of lessons from the mitzvah of eating *matzah* and the prohibition of having *chometz* on Pesach | BY ROBERT SUSSMAN

MIX FLOUR FROM ANY ONE OF THE FIVE GRAINS

– wheat, oats, spelt, rye, or barley – together with cool water, and leave that mixture unattended, and, within minutes, that mixture, which will form a basic dough, will become *chometz* (leavened). *Chometz* is the result of a natural process that takes place over a certain period of time. For bread to qualify as *matzah* (unleavened bread), it must be made from something that could have become *chometz*. In other words, *matzah* and *chometz* are made out of the very

same ingredients – flour from one of the five grains mixed with water – the only difference between them being one thing: the passage of time. Unless prevented by ceaselessly working with the dough (or by some other means), the dough that's formed from mixing flour with water will naturally begin to become *chometz* without us having to do or add anything else to that mixture.¹

In contrast to *chometz*, *matzah* requires us to work as fast as possible and without any interruption, so as to prevent the nat-

ural *chometz* process from occurring. We must ceaselessly work the dough from the time the flour and water are mixed, divide it up into portions, roll it out, and then bake it – all within just a few minutes, before the *chometz* process has a chance to start. *Matzah* is created suddenly, in great haste, overcoming the constraints and natural influences of time, reminding us of the fact that² “in haste [we] went out from Egypt”. *Matzah* teaches us how Hashem is able to conduct things beyond the constraints of the natural world.

OUT OF TIME

Our redemption from Egypt was not natural. It was not part of any historical, political, or other emancipation process. Hashem emphasised this by taking us out in a way that only He could accomplish: miraculously, openly breaking the



bounds and laws of nature, and with incredible speed, acting even beyond the constraints of time, and by His forcing the Egyptians to send us out against their will. While the many miracles that took place during the ten plagues and the exodus were what we would call supernatural – beyond the bounds of nature – the exodus itself was an event that was even beyond the constraints of time.

As a remembrance of our going out from Egypt being in this great haste, Hashem prohibited us from having *chometz*, which represents the bounds of the natural world, existing solely as a result of the passage of time, just one of the many causes and effects that Hashem set in place when He created the world. And, He simultaneously commanded us to eat *matzah*, which exists without any investment of time in it – requiring that it be produced in great haste, because we went out to our freedom in a miraculous way that demonstrated that we

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were not bound by the constraints of time.

In other words, the lesson of the prohibition of *chometz* and the *mitzvah* to eat *matzah* is to consider and to recognise that, in truth, the natural order of things is not conducted in an independent way in creation (ie. Mother Nature), but that everything that happens is all done by Hashem. It is prohibited for us to consume *chometz* on *Pesach* in order to eradicate from our hearts the thought that everything runs according to nature without the hand of Hashem directing it and controlling it at every moment.

ONE NIGHT ONLY

So, we can ask an obvious question: why are we only obligated to eat *matzah* at the

seder on the first night of *Pesach*³, whereas *chometz* is prohibited the entire seven (eight outside of Israel) days of *Pesach* – especially since both are meant to strengthen the belief that Hashem alone controls and does everything?

The Haggadah says, “Why do we eat this *matzah*? Because our forefathers did not have time for their dough to rise...as it says, “They baked their dough that they took out from Egypt (into) cakes of *matzah* that did not become *chometz* because they were driven out from Egypt.” Simply put, *matzah* comes to remind us that the redemption began with our being driven out from Egypt. Even though we did not actually leave Egypt until the daytime, as Hashem did not want us to leave like thieves in the



CHAG SAMEACH

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night⁴, the beginning of the redemption was on the night of *Pesach* – therefore, the *mitzvah* of eating *matzah* is only on the evening of the first day of *Pesach*.⁵

But, there's another reason. As noted, we eat *matzah* in order to remind us that we left Egypt in haste. Why did we leave in haste? Because the Egyptians suddenly decided to act against their own wishes, in the absence of any natural cause for so doing, and drive us out from their land, showing Hashem's absolute dominion over everything – the world, as well as all of its inhabitants. We didn't leave when they told us to get out, however, we left on Hashem's schedule. Accordingly, *matzah* reminds us of Hashem's absolute control over His world. In this way, *matzah* teaches us the peak and perfection of *emunah* (belief) that, in fact, there is no nature at all, that every thing and every moment is merely the will of Hashem.

On the night of the exodus from Egypt, Hashem gave us a special gift of perfection in perceiving the way in which He conducts His world, thereby removing us from the impurity of Egypt into which we had sunk so deeply. Immediately afterwards, however, we descended from that elevated level that Hashem had given to us. We then had to work on ourselves, during the 49 days between *Pesach* and

when the Torah was given to us (*Shavuot*), in order to reach, through our own efforts, the level that we had previously received as a gift from Hashem on that first night of *Pesach*.

Matzah represents the peak of perfect *emunah* – a level that we're meant to toil to reach in our service of G-d, living with that perfect faith in our hearts and all of our actions. Since it's not possible to remain at that peak, however, the obligation of eating *matzah* is only on the first night. After that, we merely continue to refrain from eating *chometz*, so as to accustom ourselves to recognise, over the course of the seven days of *Pesach*, that nature does not control the world, but that everything is the will of Hashem.

THE IMPORTANCE OF OUR ACTIONS

The preparation and tremendous toil required for *Pesach* – the search, removal, and destruction of every single crumb of *chometz*, along with all of the work involved with the baking of the *matzos* – is a remembrance of those things that we did in Egypt while preparing to go out to our physical freedom⁶, and which would, ultimately, enable us to go out to our spiritual freedom when we later received the Torah at Har Sinai.

The *Sefer HaChinuch*, the anonymously authored *Book of Mitzvah Education*, explains what is at the root of another *Pesach mitzvah*, the *mitzvah* prohibiting us from breaking any of the bones in the *korban Pesach*, the lamb or sheep that was slaughtered on the afternoon of the 14th of Nissan and then eaten on the night of the 15th of Nissan at the *Pesach seder*. He says that it is not befitting the honour of the children of kings to chew bones and break

them like dogs, something the poor do because of hunger. We are meant to be a "treasure from all the nations, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation".⁷

He explains that a man's heart and all of his thoughts follow after the actions with which he occupies himself, whether for good or for bad. Even if a man will be perfectly righteous, if he will occupy himself with doing inappropriate things then he will, at some time, turn from his righteousness and he will become a completely wicked person. Therefore, it should not be difficult to understand why many *mitzvos* in the Torah are precisely for the purpose of remembering the miracles of Egypt because our involvement with such things causes us to become affected by them in a most profound way. So, each and every year, it's appropriate for us to engage in actions that reflect the higher level that we are on at this special time so that those actions can influence us accordingly.

CRUMBS

Our Sages teach that *chometz* is representative of the *yetzer harah* (the inclination or drive to do evil). The *gemara*⁸ says, "Master of the Universe, it is revealed and known before You that it is our desire to do Your will – and what stops us? The leaven in the dough!" Rashi explains that this expression, "the leaven in the dough", refers to the *yetzer harah*. And the *Zohar* likewise compares *chometz* and *matzah* to, respectively, the *yetzer harah* and the *yetzer hatov* (the inclination or drive to do good).

Why is it that the Torah is so stringent when it comes to the prohibition of *chometz* – more so than any other prohibition in the entire Torah? And, so much so, that we are not even allowed⁹ to see or to find any *chometz* during *Pesach* – requiring us before the start of the Yom Tov to go on a search and destroy mission, making sure to look in every nook and cranny, so that we shouldn't leave behind even a single crumb?

Interestingly, the Torah also prohibits us from offering up *chometz* on the *mizbe'ach* (the altar) all year round. The *Sefer HaChinuch* teaches that by keeping *chometz*



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(which takes time to make) out of an offering to Hashem, a person will acquire the character trait of “*zerizus*” through being forced to move quickly in the preparation of his dough, so as to prevent it from becoming *chometz*. The Hebrew word “*zerizus*” does not translate easily into English. We might refer to someone who has this quality as a “self-starter”, the kind of person who can be counted on to get things done, who identifies a problem and then finds a way to solve it. It’s a combination of quickness, zealotness, eagerness, and doing things right away.

LAZINESS

Where does laziness come from? Man is, by his very nature, lazy. Why? Because he was made from coarse, heavy, physical material, ie. the earth, and, therefore he doesn’t want to do work or to be burdened with anything. A man, quite literally, needs a miracle to overcome the laziness that is inherent in his nature, so as to avoid falling into the hands of the *yetzer harah*, otherwise he will certainly not succeed.

In order for dough to rise, there’s no need to add any additional ingredient – automatically, as a result of the passage of time, of just waiting, of mere inactivity, it will become *chometz*. And it’s the same with laziness. Simply by refraining from doing anything, the *yetzer harah* enters inside a person’s heart. Our Sages teach, even though laziness doesn’t necessarily bring about evil actively as a result of a person actually doing something, it nevertheless can bring evil about passively, simply by a person sitting and doing nothing.

WHY WAS MAN NAMED AFTER THE EARTH?

Why was man called Adam after the earth, *adamah*, from which he was formed, ie. the physical part of him, and not after the spiritual part that’s in him, which Hashem Himself breathed into him, and which, our Sages say, refers to the fact that Hashem blessed man with the abilities to know and to speak – and, therefore, he could have been called something more noble like “knower” or “speaker”, rather than “earth”?



Man’s purpose in the creation, and the challenge for him in this world, is specifically to change his nature – choosing to elevate his spiritual nature above his foul, coarse, physical nature rooted in the earth from which he was formed. The greatest expression of this is when a man overcomes his natural tendency to be lazy.

Chometz is the *yetzer harah* of laziness and this is why even a crumb of *chometz* cannot be nullified. The way of waging war with the *yetzer harah*, as with *chometz*, is to completely destroy it because even a single, solitary crumb left remaining is able to spread within a person, like a slow-acting venom, and return him to his natural state of being lazy.

GUARDING MITZVOS FROM CHOMETZ

The Torah teaches¹⁰, “You shall guard the *matzos*”, and our Sages teach regarding this *mitzvah*, using a play on words, “Don’t read, ‘You shall guard the *matzos*,’ rather, ‘You shall guard the *mitzvos*,’ [a difference in spelling of a single letter, *vav*]; just as we must not allow *matzah* to become *chometz*, so too, we must not allow a *mitzvah* to become *chometz* – instead, when a *mitzvah* comes into our

hands, we must do it straight away.”

Our Sages are teaching that there is a hidden lesson in the *mitzvah* of *matzah* – that we need to study the haste with which we went out from Egypt in order to learn from it the quality of *zerizus*. Just as it was only through haste, through acting quickly, that we could come to experience freedom, so too it’s only possible to come to fulfil the Torah and its *mitzvos* with the quality of *zerizus*. Therefore, the commandment to “guard the *matzos*” is in fact an obligation to behave with *zerizus* in all of the *mitzvos* of the Torah – to “guard the *mitzvos*”. The quality of *zerizus* is so important that the Shulchan Aruch (the Code of Jewish Law) begins the large section of laws that apply to daily Jewish living by stating, “Be mighty as a leopard, light as an eagle, fast as a deer, and strong as a lion to do the will of your Father in heaven.”

Our Sages further emphasise, “Don’t let a *mitzvah* that comes into your hands become *chometz*.” Even after we are involved with doing a particular *mitzvah*, just a slight pause in its performance can allow the *yetzer harah* to creep in, causing that *mitzvah* to become *chometz*, just like dough will become *chometz* as a result of even a small delay in working with it.



“DOUGH THAT HAS BECOME *CHOMETZ* APPEARS TO BE MORE THAN IT IS, THE AIR BUBBLES TRAPPED INSIDE IT PUFFING IT UP TO MAKE IT APPEAR BIGGER THAN IT ACTUALLY IS, IT’S SIZE BUILT ENTIRELY UPON NOTHINGNESS, UPON HOT AIR AND A TOTAL LACK OF SUBSTANCE – JUST LIKE SOMEONE WHO IS ARROGANT.”

RIISING UP

From *chometz*, we can also learn about another negative character trait that is despised by Hashem in even the tiniest amount. The *Sefer HaChinuch* teaches that leaven inflates itself and, therefore, we keep away from it as a hint to the character trait of arrogance, which is repulsive to Hashem. Just as flour and water when mixed into dough will, over time, inflate and increase in size even if there isn’t anything else added to the mixture, so too, a man’s opinion of himself can and will increase, becoming exaggerated, in the absence of any reason for so doing.

Dough that has become *chometz* also appears to be more than it is, the air bubbles trapped inside it puffing it up to make it appear bigger than it actually is, it’s size built entirely upon nothingness, upon a bunch of hot air and a total lack of substance – just like someone who is arrogant. Whereas with dough that is still *matzah*, it’s just the opposite, as its appearance hides nothing – what you see is what you get.

Even though the primary *mitzvah* regarding *matzah* is eating it, not baking it, our Sages teach that it’s appropriate for a person to exert labour in the baking of *matzos*, so that he may learn from it the character trait of *zerizus*.

FROM SLAVERY TO FREEDOM

Pesach is called by our Sages “*zman charu-sainu*”, the time of our freedom. Our going out to freedom meant leaving Egypt. We normally translate the word *mitzrayim* to mean “Egypt”, but the root of the word *metzer* literally means “bounded” or “limited”. The Haggadah teaches, “A man is obligated to see himself each year as if he went out from *Mitzrayim*,” because each and every year the obligation is renewed to wage war with the enslavement of the *yetzer harah* and to go out to freedom. This is the exodus from Egypt in every generation, going out from the “*meitzarim*” – the boundaries and the limitations of the *yetzer harah*. To escape those shackles, we must keep searching for and guarding against even the smallest amount – a single, solitary crumb of *chometz* – of our *yetzer harah*.

MAKING THE MOST OF PESACH

The days leading up to *Pesach*, as well as the actual seven days of *Pesach*, are days that are appropriate for going out from the enslavement of the *yetzer harah* to freedom. As we busy ourselves with searching for, removing, and destroying every last crumb of *chometz* in our homes, so too we must arouse and in-

spire ourselves to do the same with the *yetzer harah* lurking deep inside us. A person acquires his freedom only through destroying the *yetzer harah*. Without searching constantly after it, however, it’s impossible to find. Just like the search for *chometz*, the search for the *yetzer harah* needs to be in the tiniest cracks and crevices; anywhere it might be able to hide from sight.

We must start our search with the things that are the largest and end with the smallest things in our lives, keeping in mind that the *yetzer harah* isn’t only able to hide in evil deeds, but can even hide in good deeds (ie. we don’t know entirely what motivates us to do things, including even *mitzvos* – for example, praise, recognition, and honour, or a sincere desire to serve Hashem?). Our Sages teach that the *mitzvah* of telling over the going out from Egypt at the seder must “begin with our embarrassment, our shame, and conclude with our praise”. The *yetzer harah* is our embarrassment, tripping us up to do shameful things, but when we wage war with it and manage to fight off its clutches and go out from being enslaved to it, then we become worthy of praise. ■

Adapted from sichos by the Sifsei Chaim, Rabbi Chaim Friedlander, ztz”l.

¹If one uses warm water, or substitutes it with fruit juice, or adds eggs, or sugar, or other ingredients, the *chometz* process will take even less time to begin.

²Devarim 16:3

³The eating of *matzah* on the second night of *Pesach* in *chutz l’aretz* (outside of Israel) is a Rabbinic commandment.

⁴Ramban on Shemos 12:31 d”h “*Vayikra l’Moshe u’l’Aharon layla*”. (My thanks to Aron Ziegler for locating this source.)

⁵Some authorities, eg. the Gra, maintain that eating *matzah* the rest of *Pesach* is a *mitzvas reshus* (ie. something we can choose to do and for which we then get credit for having done a *mitzvah*)

⁶The gemara teaches that among the differences between *Pesach* in Egypt and every other *Pesach* thereafter was that, in Egypt, the prohibition of *chometz* was only one day.

⁷Shemos 19:6

⁸Brachos 17a

⁹The prohibitions refer to our own *chometz*, not to *chometz* that belongs to others.

¹⁰Shemos 12:17