

Thinking Torah

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Pesach/Parashat Tzav

The Psychology of Chametz

Some years ago; maybe it was the first year that we were married, I don't remember exactly; I had a rather unexpected realisation in the process of Pesach cleaning. You see, it was the first time that I had really cleaned an entire home - top to bottom, oven racks and yes, even that grime that you find in the rubber seal on the fridge - yes all of it! My wife was at work, and as a teacher, I had "vacation", and I was doing it all by myself. I spent a number of days leading up to Pesach meticulously cleaning and scrubbing. Then came Bedikat Chametz, searching for that forgotten crumb, or the pretzel that slipped down the side of the couch. And then the next morning, we took our chametz outside and burned it.

After this process, this obsession with chametz, I felt that chametz had taken on an identity, a life of its own. It suddenly had undergone a metamorphosis. It had become "the enemy." And we were trying to root it out, to "search and kill." In my pre-Pesach paranoia, Chametz had developed some sort of demonic quality. I felt like I was on a quest to seek out and destroy some evil entity; that I was trying to exorcise some potent force of evil in the world. After all that's what Pesach cleaning aims to do; zap the chametz!

So is chametz "evil"? What lies at the root of our obsessive requirement to "zap" every innocent crumb? What is the reason behind the extreme laws of Issur Chametz?

CHAMETZ AND THE ALTAR OF GOD

Let us begin by noting that Pesach is not the only application in which Chametz is under ban. When the Torah describes the meal offering (the "mincha"), we are told that it was usually an offering of flour, which was mixed with oil. The flour could be brought in its natural state, or it could be offered baked as matzot, or even a pancake (for details, see Vayikra chapter 2).

Within the context of this flour offering, the Torah issues an instruction:

"No meal offering that you offer to the Lord shall be with leaven (chametz), for you shall burn no leaven (se'or) or honey in any fire offering to the Lord." (2:11)

It appears again in Parshat Tzav:

"... its remainder (of the meal offering) shall be eaten by Aaron and his sons; it shall be eaten as unleavened cake (matzot) in the sacred precinct... It shall not be baked with leaven ..." (6:9-10)

We can see that the prohibition of Chametz is not simply limited to the festival of Pesach. Chametz is also banned from the altar of God in the Mishkan. Its application to the Temple - no leaven being offered on the Temple altar - begs the question; what is it that disqualifies leaven? Why is it forbidden? We shall offer a number of approaches:

IDOLATRY

Maimonides in his famous work, the Guide to the Perplexed (3:46) suggests that the Torah forbids the offering of chametz on the Temple altar because it is too similar to the pagan idolatrous practices of the time.

"Due to the fact that the idolators would sacrifice only leaven 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"

According to this, the sole objection to chametz lies in the fact that chametz is associated with the pagan and God wishes to distance these practices and ideas from His service.

Now, of course this explanation illustrates the reason that chametz would be banned from the altar in the Temple. However, this equation of chametz with idolatry becomes even more fascinating when we apply it to the prohibition of chametz on Pesach. We know that matza symbolises the speed of the exodus (Ex. 12:39) but why should all leaven be outlawed on Pesach?

The Zohar (2:182) equates chametz and idolatry :

"Whoever eats chametz on Pesach is as if he prayed to an idol."

How is this equation made? Why is there a connection between Idolatry and Pesach? Many commentators (including the Rambam) have suggested that the ceremony of the Paschal Lamb in Egypt was a public rejection of the Egyptian worship of sheep (See Nechama Leibowitz – Studies in Shemot "Pesach Mitzrayim: The First Passover."). Rashi on Exodus 12:20 sees the command to take the lamb as a rejection of pagan worship.

Now this equates the lamb with Egypt's gods. But maybe, we can stretch things further by suggesting that the figurative corollary of the Egyptian idolatry for all future generations is the prohibition of chametz! Chametz is associated with idolatry and on Pesach we express our rejection of avoda zara via our disassociation with any leaven. See the encyclopaedic Haggada Shelema by R. Menachem Kasher (Appendix #7) where he draws a series of halakhic parallels between the laws of idolatry and the laws of chametz. Here are but a few examples:

1. The prohibition of even seeing Chametz.
2. The requirement to burn it, to totally eradicate its existence.
3. The prohibition not only of eating, but of any manner of benefit from it.
4. The prohibition of even the most miniscule particle.

These details apply for only two halakhic substances: idolatry and chametz. It is not true for any other prohibition in Jewish law. Hence, the connection between idolatry - both in the temple and on Passover, the festival in which we reject Egyptian modes of worship and align ourselves with the One God - are quite straightforward.

Maybe this is the reason that certain Jewish kings timed their anti-idolatry campaigns to coincide with Pesach; see II Kings Ch.23 and Divrei Hayamim (Chronicles) II Ch.29-30.

THE EVIL INCLINATION

Let us move on in our examination of the theology of Chametz. Chametz has been given a wider theological application by preachers throughout the ages by drawing a comparison between leaven and the "Yetzer Hara", the evil inclination, the driving force to sin.

"Rabbi Alexandri would end his daily prayers with the following supplication: 'Master of the Universe, You know full well that it is our desire to act according to your will; but what prevents us from doing so? - the yeast in the dough...'" (Talmud. Berachot 17a)

In the Torah, two terms are used to designate leaven. One term is "se'or", the other is called "chametz". What is the difference between them? Se'or is a leavening agent. It is a piece of old dough which has been allowed to reach a high level of fermentation. This is sometimes known as sourdough (or yeast). This substance is quite inedible but when a piece of sourdough (se'or) is kneaded together with a mixture of flour and water, it accelerates the rising process and creates "chametz".

Rabbi Alexandri in this text, sees 'se'or' as a metaphor for the powerful drives and inflammatory passions that lurk within us all. Our mind has the ability to distort the reality of our vision, inflate our desires and draw us in directions that we would never take if we were to follow only our cold rational side. The impulse to evil ferments and corrupts. It makes flour and water appear as soft warm enticing bread. Chametz is the evil inclination! It is the "yeast in the dough" which allows us to lose self-control, which invites irrational decisions and leads us to impropriety.

This powerful metaphor of the yetzer hara explains well the impropriety of chametz on God's altar - for we stand before God in truth and sobriety. But yet, certain questions are not fully explained by this approach. For example, the Yetzer Hara metaphor doesn't exactly explain the prohibition of chametz on Pesach. Maybe we should ban chametz during the Ten Days of Penitence when we focus on repentance and self-betterment?

ARTIFICIAL SWEETNESS

The Netziv - Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Berlin (Russia: Volozhin 1817-1893) - in his commentary HA'EMEK DAVAR takes the theology of chametz in almost a completely reverse direction. He suggests that significance of chametz lies in the exercise of human control rather than the loss of it. He also explains why this law applies specifically to the sacrificial altar and to the holiday of Passover.

"Scripture calls all substances which have a sweetening effect 'honey' because honey is the classic sweetener. As for leaven, "se'or" is a human manipulation of natural state of God's universe. It is an exercise of human machination. God warns us not to use these in the Temple, as the nearer one finds oneself to God, the less room there is for human ingenuity."

He refers us to his commentary to Exodus 13:3 where he states:

"LEAVEN MAY NOT BE EATEN (on Passover) ... matza takes no advantage of the human technological ingenuity and creativity which allows man to raise the dough more than simple flour and water which are created by God. Chametz is the epitome of human involvement in nature. Thus unleaven is the symbol of the survival and ongoing existence of the Jewish People as they survive solely through the spirit of God."

The Netziv sees the raising agent (se'or) and its product chametz as an expression of human interference in nature. Conversely, matza is an expression of the world controlled exclusively by God. Man's discovery that sourdough could cause bread to rise was a technological breakthrough in food technology, a classic human manipulation of the elements of nature. Most of the time, the advancement of civilisation in this manner is welcomed by the Torah. This creativity and ingenuity is depicted as the "divine" in man, his "image of God". Not only God, but man too, can create!

However, in a place where God's presence manifests itself most intensely - in the Temple - there is no place for man's creative spirit. In the Temple man is dwarfed by God. The altar of God is no place for human food technology. On the altar, we dedicate all the elements of God's world; the animal, vegetable and mineral; recognising and demonstrating that God is the source of them all. Chametz - the product of human manufacture - has no place on the altar of God. It would be presumptuous.

Similarly, on the festival of the miraculous birth of our nation, when an entire nation walked to their freedom away from a tyrannical regime, without lifting a finger of their own, we commemorate the power of God. God performed the Ten Plagues and we had no hand in them. At the Red Sea, the people stood huddled together, frightened, terrified in the face of the imposing Egyptian army. Moses instructed them; "Stand by and witness the deliverance which the Lord will work for you this day; for the Egyptians that you see today you will never see again. The Lord will battle for you; you hold your peace." (Ex. 14:13-14) We stood still and God saved the day.

Man had no part in the miracles of the Exodus. We therefore commemorate this momentous event by refraining from contact with chametz. We refrain from human manipulation of our most basic commodity - bread. We proclaim that the very essence of our being comes directly and completely from God.

THE BEGINNING OF THE ROAD.

One final approach comes from a contemporary scholar - Rav Yoel Bin Nun. He notes that there are occasions when we DO bring leaven to the Temple (although it is not offered up on the altar itself). On Shavuot - Pentecost - we bring two loaves of bread to the Temple (23:17). In the thanksgiving offering (a variation of the

peace offering - shelamim) three types of loaves are brought to the Temple: Unleavened wafers - like our matzot ; unleavened loaves - like pitta; and leavened loaves - like our bread.

What is the symbolism of leaven and unleaven in the Temple? How do they function, at the theological level. Rav Yoel explains. Leaven represents fulfilment, completion; a process which has travelled its due course. The desired state that flour and water might "become", the ultimate goal of these substances, is to transform themselves into a leaven loaf of bread. The loaf of bread is the "fulfilment", the destiny, of the flour-water mixture. Unleaven, on the other hand, is "not yet" what it aspires to be; it figuratively represents the beginning of a process which at this moment is as yet unfulfilled. Unleaven is presently immature, unripe, not yet fulfilled. It is in the early stages of a journey.

The altar of God is not a place for leaven. Before God, we are all rough round the edges. We all have a way to go in reaching our own personal destiny. We have faults, room for improvement. We cannot express ourselves before God represented by the symbol of leaven. For we are at the beginning of a journey. We are the unleavened; still travelling, on the tortuous road that is human and religious betterment.

So when do we bring leaven to the temple?

Shavuot is the festival of weeks. It is also the festival designated as the time to bring first fruits from the new crop in the Land of Israel, to the Temple. Shavuot is linked to Pesach by the Omer. We count seven cycles of seven from Pesach and then we celebrate Shavuot. Pesach is the start of a process. Shavuot is the end. On Pesach, we remove all leaven and eat only unleavened. On Shavuot we bring loaves of leaven. It is a question of a process.

Why do we eat only unleaven on Pesach? Why is leaven the anathema to Pesach? It is simple. On Pesach we had our freedom. One might revel in the euphoria of freedom and imagine that this is the ultimate goal. One might say; We have reached our target, national freedom, we have achieved independence. In response, God tells us to eat only matza, unleavened, unfulfilled bread, for seven days. Pesach begins a process. It is a cause for celebration but it is only the start. Anyone who sees Pesach as an end in itself is missing the point. The whole point of Pesach is that it represents a beginning. It is the first step of a national journey.

Woe to us if we perceive the Exodus as the totality of our freedom. If we see this step of freedom from slavery as exclusively meaningful, then we understand little about the Jewish notion of freedom. Jewish freedom is not "freedom from". It is a positive "freedom to..." It is a freedom that must be harnessed to build something better. The freedom and independence of Pesach can ONLY be understood in their true context as the initiation of a process. Pesach is only the beginning of the journey.

The "destination" of that journey comes seven weeks later in a festival which celebrates two things. First, it celebrates our spiritual challenge. It is the festival of the giving of the Torah. The Torah embodies our challenge, our goal and our destiny. Second, it is the festival of the Land of Israel. On Shavuot we bring the first fruits and stress the idea that the goal is creating "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. A people in the land of God living the moral law of God.

On Pesach we mark the beginning, the unleavened. Shavuot expresses everything that embodies our national goal. It is marked by the bringing of fully leavened, fulfilled bread.

Likewise, in the sacrifice where I express my release from a life threatening situation, when saved from a serious illness or the like, we bring three loaves: The totally flat matza wafer, the unleavened pitta loaf, and the fully risen loaf of bread. The offering describes the journey from the depths of desperation to the heights of health and life. The symbolism of this offering tells of the role that God played in breathing life into a seemingly hopeless, flat situation, granting hope and salvation. That is the role of leaven and unleaven in the thanksgiving offering. Unleaven is the beginning of the process and it leads to fulfilment in the form of the leaven.

We have offered a range of approaches to the psychology of chametz. Hopefully, we now understand "the enemy" that much better!

Wishing you all a happy unleavened Pesach.