

ANGRY HAMETZ.

Note: Rabbi Ornstein delivered this dvar Torah before Yizkor for the eighth day of Pesach 5773.

Somewhere in Jerusalem, or Tel Aviv, or Haifa, or Beer Sheva, right about now, some lucky Israeli is consuming his second hamburger-on-a-bun of the day or is scooping up her hummus with freshly baked pita bread. Somewhere in Tiberias, the Negev, or the Golan, some lucky Israeli will be drinking a shot of whiskey or a cold beer in the next couple of hours after a long day's work, while you and I count the hours, the minutes, the seconds until the end of this eighth day of Pesach: that stubborn second day of Yom Tov holdover from ancient times when our sages sagely added one restrictive Yom Tov day to insure that we observed the holiday at the correct times, in the absence of a mathematically figured calendar. Israelis have plenty of headaches that you and I are spared, but one of their consolations is that they say goodbye to matzah and hello to hametz, leavened foods, a whole day earlier than we do. Reason #300 for making aliyah, immigration to Israel.

Hametz looms large in Jewish religious consciousness during Pesach. The Torah records two reasons for refraining from it. The best known reason is that our ancestors left Egypt without giving their dough time to rise. They ate flat

bread on their way to freedom, therefore we eat flat bread through the weeklong celebration of our freedom. Less known is the reason hinted at in the Torah: Pesach is *Chag Ha-Matzot*, a farmer's festival that celebrates the approach of Spring through the consumption of non-fermented breads, particularly matzah. It is possible that, as in other cultures, refraining from fermented foods was seen as a way of cleansing oneself physically and spiritually after the Winter months. Hametz is puffy food that puffs up inside of us, and we must purify ourselves of it as we enter the new harvest season.

Technically, hametz is any one of five grains -wheat, oats, spelt, rye, or barley- that have been fermented. To become hametz, the grain or its flour need only be mixed with water and left standing for eighteen minutes or more, unbaked, to become hametz whether or not yeast or some other dough starter has been added. The rabbis of the Talmud expanded upon this rule to create a rather complex body of law regarding the destruction, nullification, sale, and consumption of hametz and hametz mixtures before and during Pesach. Given the Torah's warning that a person who eats hametz during the holiday will be spiritually excommunicated (*karet*), our sages were extremely careful regarding protecting their fellow Jews from violating this prohibition.

However, our ancestors never lost sight of the other dimension of the hametz prohibition, the symbolic one to which the Torah had already alluded. Hametz ferments and puffs up dough, which makes the consumer feel puffy and full. We read in the earliest rabbinic sources that a person's evil inclination - our arrogant, ego-tinged tendency to follow our impulses and do what we want in violation of God's will - is a form of internal hametz. We get so puffed up with pride, desire, anger, and narcissism that before we know it, our "hametz from within" has consumed us. Pesach, the early sages taught, is a time to remember to free oneself from this inner hametz through the ritual act of removing and refraining from consuming actual hametz.

Hametz as a symbol of the struggle to be free of one's inner demons and flaws is the subject of many stories and sermons in the much later literature of East European Hasidism, which tended to psychologize and personalize different teachings and practices of Judaism. One of my favorite Hasidic stories is about an incident that happened in the house of Rabbi Avraham Yehoshua Heschel, the great-great grandfather of the Jewish philosopher, Abraham Heschel. Rabbi Heschel was also known by his pseudonym, *Oheiv Yisrael*, one who loves his fellow Jews, and the name was appropriate. Stories abound of his deep love for other members of the community as well as his patience and compassion. The

Oheiv Yisrael was a very religious Jew, but he knew how to distinguish what is required Jewish practice from personal custom or unnecessary stringencies. As such, he was more liberal and relaxed about certain Passover food prohibitions than his colleagues were, and my sense is that Pesach was a far more enjoyable affair in his home. Once, the grandson of a rabbinic colleague was visiting the *Oheiv Yisrael* for Pesach. He had learned well from his grandfather every over-the-top stringency regarding Pesach foods and preparations, and he felt a deep obligation to share those stringencies with everyone, including his hosts. During the visit, the young man angrily scolded and argued with his host's household about everything he thought they were doing wrong. Being young and righteous can be a toxic combination, and it got to the point that the rabbi's house was soon engulfed in angry fighting. Finally, the *Oheiv Yisrael* pulled his young guest aside and asked him, "What are you doing?" The young man defiantly responded, "I'm trying to prevent people in your house from violating the prohibition of eating hametz on Pesach!" "Look," the *Oheiv Yisrael* responded, "'I'm sure your goal is sincere, but do you realize that this kind of anger you've fomented is its own form of hametz? The only difference is that this kind of hametz is forbidden all year long, not just on Pesach!"

There is a tendency in Jewish moralistic literature to disdain all expressions of anger and to encourage the individual to cultivate an anger-free disposition. This tendency is not only unrealistic, it is not emotionally or morally healthy. Some expressions of anger are what help us to maintain self respect, address injustices, and repair relationships. However, we all know about the kind of anger Rabbi Heschel was referring to, the one forbidden at all times. It is the anger fueled by know-it-all attitudes, arrogance, and self-righteousness; it is the rage that we spew onto the people we love and the people we hate, whose expression makes us feel cathartically free, but only for a very short time; it is the self-destructive attachment to self-pity and entitlement that we can't ever seem to let go of; it is the angry hametz within that propels us to lash out without thinking, to belligerently protect our fragile emotional turf, and to tune out what we don't want to hear by shouting down others. Soon enough, when the thrill of angry screaming and verbal abuse has passed we feel even more like slaves to our worst character flaws. Or, worse yet, we are so enslaved to those flaws that we remain blind to how much they enslave us and poison our relationships.

Yizkor is hopefully a good time to remember the ones we loved, their best qualities, and the forgiveness that we and they gave one another for angry words and deeds that came between us. Perhaps for some of us, it is a time to reflect

upon the anger that, like hametz, wells up inside us during holiday seasons when we contemplate matters between us and our loved ones that remain unresolved. Hopefully, through memory, prayer and silence, we can keep inching towards some acceptance and healing for what cannot be completely undone. Yizkor may also be a good time for us to think about the anger we harbor towards the living and the anger we carry with us because that is who we have become. Can we distinguish between helpful, appropriate expressions of anger and that angry hametz which is forbidden year round? As hard as it is to do, I think that we can make that distinction. As we rise for Yizkor, we pray that the *Eil Maleh Rahamim*, our God Who is full of compassion, will show us the way to replace anger and hurt with loving acceptance, so that we become people who are full of compassion as well.