

## LEAVEN AND LIFE: GETTING RID OF YOUR OUTER AND INNER HAMETZ.

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Pesach 5773.

### I. WHY AND HOW ARE WE SUPPOSED TO RID OURSELVES OF HAMETZ, LEAVENED FOODS, PRIOR TO PASSOVER?

1. The Torah forbids us from eating hametz, deriving financial benefit from hametz, and possessing hametz in our domains during Passover (See Exodus 12:15, 13:3, 13:7, 12:19) These prohibitions remind us of the unleavened bread, “the bread of affliction”, that we ate as slaves in Egypt. They also remind us of the unleavened bread that we ate on our way out of Egypt.
2. According to rabbinic interpretations of the Torah, the Torah only requires us to mentally nullify our ownership of our hametz. We do this through a specific statement of dispossession and we do so wholeheartedly. (See Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Book of Appointed Times, Laws of Hametz And Matzah, 2:2)
3. Since we cannot rely upon everyone nullifying his or her hametz with identical wholeheartedness, and since a person might be tempted to eat any hametz found during Passover, the Talmud also requires us to search for any hametz left lying around on the evening of the 14<sup>th</sup> of Nissan, the day before Passover.

### II. WHAT IS “INNER HAMETZ?”

1. The yetzer hara, our “evil inclination,” is built into us by God. In our parlance, yetzer hara is the sum total of our most basic impulses and desires. Jewish tradition recognizes that these impulses are not inherently evil at all. In fact, without them, we would never marry, procreate, or try to move anything ahead in our lives. When we freely channel them with the laws and restraints of the Torah, our impulses are very good. When we leave them unchecked, our impulses can truly lead to evil and self destructive behavior.
2. Jewish tradition recognizes that the evil impulse is often expressed as our puffing up with pride and ego like hametz which ferments and puffs up dough. We behave like Pharaoh, presuming that we are “The King.”
3. The tradition also recognizes that when the evil impulse takes control of us in this way, it makes us its slaves.
4. Every day, but especially on Passover, we are reminded that the Exodus from Egypt was not simply something that happened to our ancestors long ago in history. It is also something that happens inwardly each day of our lives. We are always trying to free ourselves of the yetzer hara, our personality flaws, addictions, bad behaviors, that keep us from being fully who we can and should be.

5. Prior to Passover, we take extra precautions to search for and clean out our “inner hametz”, that part of us which puffs us up with pride, self deception, bad habits, etc.

III. THE RULE CONCERNING SEARCHING FOR HAMETZ ON THE EVE OF THE 14<sup>TH</sup> OF NISSAN. FROM THE MISHAH, (JEWISH ORAL LAW TRADITION). TRACTATE PESACHIM, 1:1.

*ON THE EVENING OF THE FOURTEENTH OF NISSAN (lit. “at the light of the fourteenth”) WE SEARCH FOR HAMETZ USING THE LIGHT OF A FLAME. ANY PLACE INTO WHICH HAMETZ WOULD NOT BE CARRIED DOES NOT REQUIRE SEARCHING.*

IV. A SPIRITUAL INTERPRETATION OF THIS MISHNAH PASSAGE FROM THE BOOK TOLDOT YAACOV YOSEPH, BY YAACOV YOSEPH OF POLNOYE, STUDENT OF THE BAAL SHEM TOV, AND ONE OF THE FOUNDERS OF CHASIDIC JUDAISM.

For the first thirteen years of his life, (that is, up through the bar mitzvah year when a person becomes a responsible adult), only the evil inclination operates within a person. It “ferments” a person with bad traits and behavior. When **light comes to his fourteenth year**, during which he develops his good inclination that leads him to Torah and mitzvot, he is obligated to search out the hametz of his evil inclination. He must do this using **the light of a flame**. (The light and flame being referred to here are Torah and mitzvot), “For God’s commandment is a flame and God’s Torah is light.” (Proverbs 20:27) From this point forth, a person must listen only to the counsel of the good inclination.

(Concerning the rule about hametz), the Torah only requires us to mentally nullify it. (Symbolically this means that), all a person is obligated to do is regret his past behaviors –his “inner hametz- inwardly and make the inner commitment to nullify all aspects of his evil inclination. However, since for the first thirteen years of his life he got habituated to clinging to the evil inclination, he is obligated to search for his “inner hametz” in all the cracks and holes (of his life), so as to remove it entirely from his possession.

(NB—The author’s ideas are based upon an ancient rabbinic tradition that until adulthood and the taking on of religious obligations, a person is ruled by his or her impulses. Note how the author has internalized the legal teaching of the Mishnah. The passage is now not only about what we do with the hametz on the outside, but with the hametz we have accumulated on the inside.)

V. SO, HOW DO YOU DO BEDIKAT HAMETZ? (THE SEARCH FOR HAMETZ)

1. On the evening before the eve of seder 1, after sunset, spread out ten pieces of bread or other leavened foods throughout your home. (Don’t forget where they are!) The ten pieces reflect a mystical tradition of thinking about the ten sefirot,

or unfolding aspects of God's "inner life" that we play out in our own lives every day.

2. Recite the blessing: PRAISED ARE YOU LORD OUR GOD RULER OF THE UNIVERSE, WHOSE MITZVOT ADD HOLINESS TO OUR LIVES, AND WHO COMMANDED US CONCERNING THE REMOVAL OF HAMETZ.
3. Using the light of a candle or a flashlight begin your search. This is an especially fun thing for kids, and you should make this a family project if possible.
4. It is customary to scoop up the hametz with a feather and a spoon, and to place it in a bag for safekeeping until it is discarded.
5. After you have found all the hametz recite the following: (This is the nullification part!): ALL HAMETZ IN MY POSSESSION, WHICH I HAVE NOT SEEN OR REMOVED, OR OF WHICH I AM UNAWARE, IS HEREBY NULLIFIED AND OWNERLESS AS THE DUST OF THE EARTH.
6. In the morning, by no later than 10 AM when we cease eating hametz on Passover eve, recite the following similar formula: ALL HAMETZ IN MY POSSESSION, WHETHER I HAVE SEEN IT OR NOT, WHETHER I HAVE REMOVED IT OR NOT, IS HEREBY NULLIFIED AND OWNERLESS AS THE DUST OF THE EARTH.
7. The hametz is then burned, thrown to the ducks at a pond, or thrown out a safe distance away from your home.

In the evening and in the morning, you can add the following words:

ADONAI OUR GOD AND GOD OF OUR ANCESTORS, JUST AS I HAVE REMOVED ALL HAMETZ FROM MY HOME AND FROM MY OWNERSHIP, SO MAY I EVICT THE EVIL INCLINATION FROM MY HEART, AND MAY YOU DISLODGE THE EVIL FROM THE EARTH.

(All texts of this ceremony are taken from the Rabbinical Assembly Feast of Freedom Haggadah, New York: 1982.)

A HAMETZ REMOVAL EXERCISE:

The tradition teaches us that in every generation a person should regard him or herself as having personally left Egypt. We understand this passage not only in a historical sense but in an inward/spiritual sense as well.

For the next few minutes write about or think about the inner hametz of which you want to rid yourself. Your inner hametz can be a character flaw, an addiction, a destructive relationship or set of attitudes, whatever hurts you and holds you back from being a better person.

1. How do you intend to "nullify," rid yourself of that hametz inwardly?
2. What kind of bedikah, inner and outer searching do you need to do to accomplish your task?

3. What changes inwardly and outwardly do you need or want to make in your life to balance your “good” inclination with your “bad” one?

Write a poem or prayer in which you ask God to help you with your process of cleaning out the inner and outer hametz of your life.