The Symbolism of Chametz

By Rav Ezra Bick

The prohibition against eating chametz (leavened bread) on Pesach (Passover) is different from all other prohibitions in the Torah. The most noticeable difference is the fact that the prohibition lasts only seven days each year. The simple question is: If chametz is "bad," for some reason, it should be prohibited all year; and if not, why is forbidden on Pesach? (The prohibition to eat on Yom Kippur is not the same - it clearly is not that food as such is forbidden, but that eating as an activity is not appropriate for the Day of Atonement. It is a day of fasting. But the days of Pesach are days of feasting.)

Chametz is different in other respects as well. All other food prohibitions fall into two possible categories: either eating, or all benefit, is forbidden. Indeed, chametz falls into the latter category. However, in addition, there is a prohibition called "lo yeira'eh lekha" - chametz may not be in your possession all the days of Pesach. There is no prohibition against having ham in one's home, but chametz must be gotten rid of before Pesach. That is why Pesach is the cause of massive spring cleaning in Jewish homes, as we conduct an obsessive search to root out any crumbs that might be lurking somewhere. There is no other prohibition like this.

The "war" against chametz on Pesach takes on other forms as well. Normally, most prohibitions are subject to a process called "bittul" - a small amount of forbidden material that is mixed in with a much larger amount of permitted food is considered to be "nullified" (the ratio needed is usually 1:60). Chametz, however, is forbidden in any amount and is not subject to bittul. Given the nature of modern food technology, the result is that any processed food must have special Pesach supervision.

The result of this complex of laws is that on Pesach, we are enjoined to strike out the very existence of chametz from our lives. Chametz is not to be found anywhere "in your borders." According to the Ramban, the aim is that chametz not be found "in your mind;" it should be like dust in your eyes. What is so bad about chametz that we are set to destroy it, and why does our attitude change so completely seven days later?

Pesach is intimately bound up with the festival that follows it seven weeks later - Shavuot. In fact, in the Torah, the date of Shavuot is not a calendar one (the sixth day in the month of Sivan) but a relative one - seven weeks after the second day of Pesach. The mitzva of "sefirat ha-omer," counting the days from Pesach for seven weeks (after which comes Shavuot), clearly indicates that Pesach starts a process which culminates in Shavuot. The usual (and quite correct) understanding is that Pesach, the holiday of freedom, is directed towards the goal of Shavuot, the day of the giving of the Torah. Freedom is the necessary prerequisite for responsibility and obligation, and, conversely, is meaningless without a goal to which one is committed.

Halakhically, there is another connection between Pesach and Shavuot, one which unfortunately we have lost sight of. Pesach is the festival of matza (that is the official name in the Torah, not my own appellation). Shavuot, in the Torah, aside from not having a date, is also distinguished by another anomaly. Every other holiday is first introduced, on a given day, and then we are told what to do on that day, what are the special rituals. Shavuot is an exception. The Torah (Vayikra 23ý:15) says to count seven weeks, and on the fiftieth day to bring a special sacrifice. This offering consists of two loaves of BREAD, "baked with leaven, the first-fruits unto God." Only afterwards does the Torah add that this day, when this offering is brought, shall be a festival day.

In other words, it is not that we sacrifice a holiday offering on Shavuot; rather, we celebrate Shavuot on the day of the special offering, two loaves of bread. So, the seven weeks between Pesach and Shavuot is a time when we move from matza to chametz. Chametz is not something which is basically undesirable, permitted perhaps only because it would be too difficult to live without it the whole year. Chametz is specifically brought to God, as an offering of first-fruits, as the culmination of a process that began with Pesach. How are we to understand this?

Without being overly symbolic, I think it is clear that the process of leavening represents the development of powers inherent in something. Matza is simply flour and water, baked. Bread is made of the same ingredients, but when you leave it around, unwatched and unbothered, it magically rises and grows, realizing a hidden potential and expressing it. Is this bad? Not at all! Indeed, it would not be exaggerated to say that this is the goal of Torah life in general. But the Torah is warning us about something on Pesach. This process of growth and development, when left to unfold of itself, wildly, can be catastrophic. The raw powers of the human spirit, unguided and unchannelled, are anarchic precisely because they are powerful, precisely because they represent real growth and vitality. The first step, when granted freedom, is not to run and let all the repressed inclinations and urges fly out. Even then - ESPECIALLY THEN - one should eat matza and beware the hidden powers bursting to be free. Seven weeks must pass, counting each day, waiting for the giving of the Torah, with its direction and goal, learning what the infinite possibility before us consists of in the positive sense, and then one bakes two loaves and brings them before God. The first fruits are the first products of man's creativity. Rather than making them in a burst of activity on the first day of freedom, we must first find the direction to "the mountain of the Lord," first learn the purpose of freedom, and then and only then take advantage of the wild unchecked powers within.

What is the connection then between Pesach, freedom, and chametz? Freedom is the cornerstone of Judaism. Freedom is a HALAKHIC concept. Without it, one cannot serve God. Paradoxical as it sounds, only free men can obey God. Pesach is the first holiday, the beginning of the cycle of the year. But the experience of freedom alone, by itself, is also an empty one. Freedom in its first stage is a negative concept - no domination by others, no laws, no restrictions. It does not have positive content. Many thinkers for this reason have tried to grant freedom only to those who have the "proper" perspective, who have first been "educated" what to do with their freedom. But the Torah knows that you cannot educate slaves. There is no alternative but to build positive meaning on the basis of negative freedom. Hence Pesach celebrates freedom itself, without the Torah. But on the other hand, the Torah dictates the food appropriate for "pure" freedom - matza, unleavened bread, unrisen, flat, unproductive. Matza is called "lechem oni," poor bread. It is true that matza is the food of slaves. But it is also the food of free men if they have not worked to impart meaning to their freedom.

And so, when the Jews left Egypt, their freedom granted to them hurriedly by the frightened Egyptians, they had no time to leaven their bread. Running out of Egypt, technically free, unrestricted in fact, they were still slaves at heart. Their only goal was to be free, to leave Egypt. But freedom is not the goal of freedom. The food of free men who have not yet learnt, who have not chosen to serve God, to SERVE higher ideals, to use their freedom to rise above servitude and not merely escape it, is matza. It would be dangerous, catastrophic, for them to taste the intoxicating flavor of leavened bread, the fruits of a process that multiplies itself in the dark, growing wildly, unchecked, raw power and potential. Indeed, chametz on Pesach is not merely a prohibited food. You have to put it out of your mind completely. It does not even exist. For these seven days, any sign of unsupervised growth must be burnt, before the wild weeds take over the fallow earth.

The cycle of Jewish living during the year is not an evenly-balanced picture of quiet moderation. On the contrary, it offers experiences of extremes, so that we may inculcate their meanings into our lives. Today is Pesach, and the experience is pure freedom. To make that a positive experience, we must conduct an obsessive search to eliminate any weeds in the garden. Pesach, the holiday of our freedom, is the day after the plowing of the earth (symbolically; this is not agriculturally accurate). The earth is bare, but that is a beautiful sight to one who knows what he can plant there. Tomorrow, starting on the second day of Pesach, we begin to count, each day, seven weeks, moving towards the days of planting. On the fiftieth day, when we have learned to control the powers and harness them to infinite goals of value, we will be able to bring a sacrifice of chametz, of development and growth.

(Jewish moral literature has used chametz as a symbol of pride. The rising dough symbolizes the overweening spirit of man. This complements what I have written. Pride is not a false thing in and of itself - it is the expression of the inner value of a productive man, a feeling for the infinite potential lurking in one's soul. But pure potential is at once infinite and at the same time empty, unrealized. Pride expressed on an empty stomach is shallow, overblown, air-filled. That is chametz on Pesach, before one has done anything other than flee the oppressor.)

Is there a need to return to Pesach each year again? Of course, for two inseparable reasons. First, we must return to the roots of freedom because we have managed to enslave ourselves anew every year. There is some truth to those who claim, or perhaps feel without giving it expression, that commitment enslaves, that responsibility limits, that service is servitude. There is a tension between Pesach and Shavuot, between freedom and Torah, even as one cannot succeed without the other. One must affirm the two and join them, after experiencing each separately. Every year, we return to pure freedom; we actually leave Egypt again. For the same reason, we return to the prohibition of chametz each year. In order genuinely to renew our experience of freedom, we must place aside the fruits of freedom, the powers of growth, the content of production. That will come, in time. Pesach, as we all know, is poor in gastronomic delights, despite the best efforts of cookbooks and matza factories. Freedom is a poor dish, and that is the way it should be savored, for the taste is in what is not yet there.

Halakhic summary:

1. Chametz may not be eaten in any form on Pesach, for seven days (eight days outside of Israel).

2. It is prohibited to have chametz in your possession during Pesach (beginning one hour before noon on the day before Pesach). Either one simply gets rid of it all, or it can be sold to a non-Jew through the offices of your local Rabbi.

3. On the night BEFORE Pesach (or two nights before, if Pesach falls on Saturday night), one searches through the entire house to insure that there is no chametz around. The found chametz, and any left over, is burnt the next morning. One mentally removes any remaining chametz from one's mind and makes it "hefker" (free, unowned).

3. Pesach is "the festival of our freedom." That phrase is added to the prayers all seven days.

4. Beginning with the second day, we count each night, from one to forty-nine. The formal counting is in the form, "today is the -nn- day, which is -ww- weeks and -dd- days in the omer."

5. Starting the first day of Pesach, we stop adding the prayer for rain. The earth is expected to have absorbed all it can - now is the time to start producing.

Did I forget to mention the lesson I learned at the 1964 World's Fair? I lived within walking distance of Flushing Meadows, where the fair was held, and students (yes, I was in high school then) could get tickets for 25 cents. Naturally, Pesach vacation was a great time to go and spend the whole day there. So we packed matza sandwiches. In the matza, wanting to make this a fun day, we placed salami. After three or four hours of walking around, we found a shady spot, washed our hands, recited the appropriate blessings, and got ready to eat, only to discover that salami and matza make a poor couple. The fat from the meat had soaked into the matza, rendering it a mealy mass of mush. You see, fat food does not go with matza. Matza is "poor bread."