

SEARCHING FOR THE CHAMETZ WITHIN

by Rabbi Yehudah Prero

Of all the commandments associated with Pesach, there is one that, due to the severity of its transgression, stands out from all the others. On Pesach, one is not permitted to have in one's possession any "Chametz," leaven substances. One can not eat or own bread or any product that is leaven during Pesach. The only "flour" product permitted is Matzo, a cracker-like bread made from a dough consisting of only flour and water, which is not allowed to rise. In order to assure that our homes are Chametz - free for Pesach, we go through extensive cleaning and preparing, to assure that not even a crumb of Chametz will be found or seen during Pesach.*

Our Sages have told us that Chametz and the preparations associated with it are extremely symbolic. Chametz represents the evil within us, our Yetzer HoRa - our Evil Inclination. It represents all of our character flaws such as haughtiness, jealousy, unbridled passion and lust. Just as we need to remove every speck of Chametz from our household, so too we need to remove every speck of spiritual Chametz from our beings. Just as much time and effort is expended on preparing ourselves physically for Pesach, by removing any hint of Chametz, we must also exert much time and effort on preparing ourselves spiritually for Pesach, by working on improving our character, which is accomplished by removing all the evil traits we unfortunately carry with us.

One would think that these self improvement efforts would be more appropriate in preparing for Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur, the holiest days of the year on which we are judged for either life or death. Why is such extensive introspection and spiritual improvement needed now, before Pesach?

The great sage Shammai taught (in Avos 1:15) "Say little and do much." In the tractate of Berachos, we find the teaching of Rav Meir, said by Rav Huna: "A man's words should always be few in addressing G-d." These directives by our sages to "cut down" on speaking seem to be disregarded come Pesach. We find that the Torah tells us "And you should tell to your children (about the departure from Egypt)...." We find in the Hagada "All that increase their telling about the departure from Egypt - this is praiseworthy!" In fact, we even find that the name of the holiday itself relates to speech: Pesach is a combination of the two words "peh sach," "the mouth speaks." Why, come Pesach, are we all of the sudden ignoring the directives of our sages to minimize our speech?

As we said above, Chametz represents the bad within us. As long as we carry this "Chametz" within us, we might value ourselves for more than we are truly worth. Our haughtiness blinds us into thinking that we are better people than we really are. We do not want to recognize our faults. We act like we are righteous, although deep in our hearts we know that we are not. We act like we are

sincere, although we know that we really are not. This is always a problem. However, it is a huge problem come Pesach. We tell our children at the Seder about the miracles of G-d and how we are to appreciate them. Do we really appreciate them? We relate to our children all of the lessons we are to learn from the slavery and the redemption. Have we learned anything from these lessons? Are our children going to believe us when we try and impart these messages, or will they shrug it off and brand us as hypocrites? Furthermore, we spend a large part of the Seder thanking G-d for saving us and singing His praises. Do we really appreciate what G-d has done for us? Is our thanks and praise sincere? While we might appear devout to others, G-d knows the truth. He is not interested in people singing empty praises to Him. He is not interested in lip service. He is not interested in hearing thanks from fools, those who think they can pass themselves off as that which they are not.

How do we make sure that we are not confronted with these serious problems on Pesach? We must be sure that we spend a proper amount of time before Pesach preparing ourselves spiritually for the holiday. We must remove the Chametz from within us, the Chametz that causes us to appear as righteous when we are not. We have to be sincere in our relationship with both G-d and our fellow man. If we do not rectify the flaws in our character before Pesach, if we do not remove the Chametz before Pesach comes, we will meet with disaster. Neither G-d nor our children will listen to what we have to say. However, if we improve our character, we overcome our jealousy, we control our passions, we humble our egos, we will be properly prepared to speak meaningful words from the heart on Pesach. G-d will appreciate our praises and our children will learn from us. It is for this reason that self-improvement before Pesach is of the utmost importance. Once we have prepared ourselves for this occasion, we can speak freely, as our Sages tell us "All who increase their telling about the departure from Egypt, they are praiseworthy!"

(From Sefer HaToda'ah) *(AN IMPORTANT NOTE...There are many laws dealing with all aspects of Chametz: what is "ownership," what is to be done with Chametz, what products are Chametz, etc.. Because these laws are large in number, fact dependent for proper application, and some are rather complex, if one has questions concerning Chametz, they should speak to their local rabbi to clarify any issue. Review and application of the laws can not be properly conducted in this forum.)