

PIE FROM THE SKY

by Rabbi Naftali Reich

At the conclusion of each Passover my children always ask me to reward them for their strenuous efforts in packing away all the Pesach utensils with a late night (early morning!) trip to the pizza store. I have pretty much resigned myself to this annual ritual. The store is invariably packed and I don't relish standing on line for half an hour for a poorly baked pizza pie. However, the alternative of dealing with disgruntled kids who have been counting on the post-Pesach treat is not too exciting either. (In life we do have to pick our battles.)

Last year, standing in a line that stretched way beyond the door got me wondering. Can it be that the yearning for pizza is so strong that it prompts people to go to such extraordinary lengths to obtain it as soon as the festival is over? Could there perhaps be something deeper here than meets the eye here?

In the Shulchan Aruch there is actually an opinion (followed by many Sephardic Jews) to eat chometz immediately after Pesach. Thus, many have the tradition of preparing the havdalah ceremony over a glass of beer. It's striking that on Pesach itself we are forbidden to ingest even a crumb of chometz; and the prohibition of eating chometz is exceptionally stringent. Yet, after Pesach we are encouraged to eat chometz right away. But if it is so spiritually toxic, shouldn't we gradually re-acclimate ourselves to eating something so dangerous?

Chometz is indeed considered spiritually toxic on Pesach. The commentaries explain that flour and water are the two most basic staples that enable life. They signify the material dimension of our lives. Taken in abundance, they encourage the ego to expand. We become inflated and lose the correct perspective of who is the source of our material prosperity. The motzah puts matters into perspective, reminding us of our obligation to surrender our desires while answering to a higher authority.

By removing ourselves from chometz and eating matzah during Pesach, we are detoxifying and rebuilding our depleted spiritual antibodies, while fortifying our immune system so that we can re-engage the 'real world' and thrive in it. But immediately after Pesach, we celebrate having been 'detoxified,' ready and able to ingest chometz without being harmed by it.

The experience of Pesach should be felt as a process of rebirth as Hashem's servants, similar to the process geirim undergo. Whereas we previously served our own egos, or bent our principles to align with the wishes of others, we now have been re-educated to subjugate ourselves to Hashem alone.

I once stayed with a close friend in the hospital while his mother underwent a bone marrow transplant. After she was transferred from recovery to a patient room, we visited her. As soon as we entered the ward, we had to put on surgical gowns and masks and go through a complete disinfection process. When we finally stood outside her room, we could only communicate with her through a thick pane of glass. Her white cell count was so low and her immune system was so fragile that any germs could prove fatal. The doctors wanted to ensure that the new marrow and blood had grafted into her system and the white blood cell count was beginning to rise. In the meantime, it was critical to maintain a totally sterile environment.

A couple of days later when her count began to rise, we were allowed to open the door and communicate with her through the doorway. It was a fantastic feeling when at the end of the week we were able to stand right by her bedside and talk with her face to face. She was in recovery mode and her immune system was becoming stronger. This was cause for rejoicing. The operation had been successful!

On Pesach we experience a delicate operation of a spiritual sort. Mitzrayim is connected to the word "meitzar," oppressive straits. During the year, we are all imprisoned to some degree by external forces and inner drives that alienate us from Hashem. Pesach affords us the life-giving opportunity to rise above our enslavement, to free ourselves for seven days from the insidious poisons that invade our system. Upon the conclusion of Yom Tov it is a great simcha when we can demonstrate that the operation was successful - we are "detoxed" and have been blessed with a new lease on life spiritually. We can eat chometz and engage the physical in a state of harmony with our neshomoh.

"Next customer!" the fellow at the counter called, returning me to the hub-hub in the pizza store. Yes, the half-baked pizza did look a bit more attractive as the fellow whipped his pizza slicer around the pie and slapped the box in front of me. May we all be granted a good "detox" over Pesach, enabling us to live on a more elevated and sanctified plane of existence. Next year in Jerusalem!

Wishing you a Chag Kosher V'somayach.

Sincerely

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