

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LEAVENING AGENTS AND THE YETZER HARA

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Vayikra

The Relationship Between Leavening Agents and the Yetzer Hara

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tapes on the weekly Torah portion: Tape #674, Saying Korbonos. Good Shabbos!

Parshas Vayikra contains the halachos of various sacrifices, including the Korban Mincha. The Mincha offering is made from flour and oil and although it is baked, it is not allowed to become leavened [Vayikra 2:11]. Neither leavening agents (seor) nor sweeteners (devash) may be added.

Rabbeinu Bechaye brings two reasons for this prohibition. First he quotes the Ramba"m, in his Moreh Nevuchim [Guide to the Perplexed]. According to the Moreh Nevuchim, the custom of idolaters, when bringing meal offerings to their gods was that they specifically added leavening agents and sweeteners. To distinguish Jewish ritual from the taboo rites of the pagans, the Torah prohibited preparing a flour offering in the same fashion as that used by the idolaters. This explanation would make the prohibition to add seor and devash to flour offerings similar to the Torah's prohibition to build a single-stone matzevah for offering sacrifices, because that was the type of structure used by idolaters, whose offerings are "hated by the L-rd our G-d" [Devorim 16:22].

Rabbeinu Bechaye offers his own explanation as to the why chametz [leaven bread] is prohibited in sacrifices. A sacrifice, Rabbeinu Bechaye writes, is meant to achieve atonement. Were it not for a person's evil inclination, the person would never sin and there would be no need for sacrifices. Rabbeinu Bechaye refers to the evil inclination by the term "meis and madiach" - meaning the enticer and corrupter. Leaven (seor) and sweeteners (devash) represent man's evil inclination. Chametz is symbolic of the yetzer hara; therefore, the offering brought to atone for sin must be free of chametz.

Rabbeinu Bechaye then links this idea with the Rabbinic teaching concerning the prohibition against possessing chametz on Pessach. The chametz prohibition is exceptionally severe - one who eats it is deserving of Kares and one is not even allowed to own chametz. Our Rabbis teach that this

prohibition symbolizes the fact that we must go to great lengths to remove the evil inclination from our hearts.

In his work Kad HaKemach, Rabbeinu Bechaye elaborates that the prohibition of (a) not seeing chametz [baal ye'raeh] and (b) the prohibition of having chametz found in our possession [baal yimatze] correspond with the idea that the evil inclination should not be manifest (a) through our actions and (b) through our thoughts. Just as we are commanded to nullify chametz in our hearts, so too, we are commanded to nullify the evil inclination.

Rav Avigdor Nebenzahl cites the prayer of the Amora Rav Alexandri [Berachos 17a], following his recital of Shmoneh Esrei, as a Talmudic source for linking leaven to the evil inclination: It is revealed and known to You that our wish is to do Your desire, and what stops us? The leavening agent in the bread (seor she'bisa) and foreign domination (shibud malchiyus). Rashi there equates "seor she'bisa" with the yetzer hara [evil inclination].

Rav Nebenzahl explains this metaphor. When yeast is added to the other ingredients in a challah recipe, the small amount of dough in the mixing bowl suddenly rises to filling the entire bowl and perhaps even overflowing. How does this happen? It is not magic. It is the effect of carbon dioxide. The CO₂ gas created by the mixture of flour, water, and the leavening agent makes the dough rise. If a person sticks his finger in the middle of the dough after it rises, the dough plops down, falling flat.

This is why the "seor" is like the "yetzer hara". The "yetzer hara" appears to us as an enormous power of huge dimensions. But in reality, it is all air. If we puncture it, it will collapse. The "yetzer hara" is an illusion. We all have our "yetezer haras" - sometimes for money, sometimes for honor, sometimes for women. But it is an illusion. Passion and physicality is always greater in the abstract than it is in reality. Expectation and anticipation always exceed the real thing when it comes to physical matters. We think the "yetzer hara" is unconquerable, but most of it is fluff. For this reason, the evil inclination is compared to the leavening agent.

Rav Nebenzahl adds the following profound insight: When Yaakov fled with his wives and family from his father-in-law, Rochel stole Lavan's "teraphim" [idols], placed them in her camel's saddlebag and sat upon them to hide them from her father. The Ibn Ezra and many others, based on the Zohar, explain that the "teraphim" had certain magical powers based on the "powers of impurity" in the world. Lavan was a sorcerer and used these "teraphim" to ascertain information about the future. The Zohar states that Rochel feared that Lavan would use these "teraphim" to locate Yaakov and was consequently trying to hide them from him.

The Zohar asks: If this was Rochel's motive why did she not hide the "teraphim" or throw them in the river? Why did she take them with her? The Zohar answers that as long as the "teraphim" were only hidden, they would have still worked and Lavan would have used them to locate Yaakov via his power of divination. It was only by sitting on the "teraphim" that their power was deactivated. When a person demonstrates total disdain for idols, their power is in fact nullified. Avodah Zarah only has

power when one attributes power to it. If one treats Avodah Zarah with disdain, it loses its power.

Rav Nebenzahl points out that there are only two items in all of halacha where the concept of bitul [mental nullification] applies - chametz and Avodah Zarah. A Jew's declaration that chametz is nullified like the dust of the earth renders it halachically as non-chametz and equivalent to the dust of the earth (regarding the Biblical prohibition of having it in one's possession). Likewise, a Gentile's nullification and rejection of his idol, renders it to be no longer Avodah Zarah from a halachic perspective.

Chametz is all about the Yetzer Hara, which is all CO₂ - exploding gases. The Yetzer Hara is a bunch of hot air. It has power because we give it power. The way to disable its power is to nullify it. This is what we are supposed to do on Pesach. Likewise, the way to get rid of Avodah Zarah is to demonstrate that it is meaningless. Then it will lose its power.

This is why seor is equated with the Yetzer Hara. It looks big and impressive and powerful but all a person needs to do is stick a finger in the dough and it deflates. This is the lesson of Bitul Chametz. Treat the yetzer hara as what it really is and its power will evaporate.

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