

Shabbat HaChodesh 5782
Chametz Riddance
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Here is a counting challenge: How many mitzvot do you hear in this verse from today's special Torah reading:

“Seven days you shall eat matza; on the very first day, you shall remove chametz from your homes, for whoever eats leavened bread from the first day to the seventh day, that person shall be cut off from Israel.” (Exodus 12:15)

I heard two, or maybe three: eat matza, and remove chametz from your home, because you may not eat it.

As for eating matzah, you *know* why we eat it; as we read from the Torah today: our ancestors

“baked matzot of the dough that they had take out of Egypt, for it was not leavened, since they had been driven out of Egypt and could not delay; nor had they prepared any provisions for themselves.”
(Ex. 12:39).

As with other edible Pesach symbols, we eat matzah for a specific reason: to remember, and in some way relive, our bondage and our liberation—for matzah is *lechem oni*, poor people's bread, which we ate in Egypt, as well as the bread of freedom we ate in a hurry when we left.

Like nearly all mitzvot we are commanded to perform by “doing something,” the Torah stipulates no penalty for failure to comply.

By contrast, in the case of chametz, the Torah gives no reason for ridding our homes—in fact our entire territory—of it, yet imposes a severe penalty for non-compliance:

“That person shall be cut off from Israel.”
(Ex. 12:15).

We have many, many rules and practices about getting rid of chametz because of the seriousness of ridding ourselves of it.

I want to make this point clearly: We have two, separate food-related responsibilities with regard to Pesach: to eat matza, and not to eat or possess any chametz. The ban on chametz is in its own, arguably more important, category. Those of you who do bedikat chametz, the ritual of searching for bits of chametz with a candle the night before Pesach begins, know that traditional custom is to burn those bits in the morning. But the rabbis of the Mishnah say, just get rid of it. That's the important thing. If you can't burn it, crumble it and throw it into the wind or cast it into the sea. It doesn't matter how, but you must make a *ritual* of ridding yourself of that bit of chametz—even if you "sold" the rest and it's still in your home, and you have every expectation of buying it back the minute Pesach ends.

My kids used to come home from school with chametz-free zone signs to place on our front door. Every time we approached our house we were reminded that we had no chametz there—or at least none in our possession.

Why? What could possibly be so important about *not* owning, seeing, or God forbid eating *chametz* during Pesach? What's the deal with chametz?

The answer ultimately is not about food. It's about who we are, fundamentally. Chametz is food in a process of change—fermenting, expanding, puffing up, On Pesach, which is officially the first month of our religious and festival calendar year, we are called to feel not only liberated, but new, unadorned, without pretense, without posturing our preening: radically humble. We are to see ourselves, and allow ourselves to be seen, simply as we are—and to be modest about it.

Crumbs of chametz are symbols for the pettiness and callousness-ness that come from puffing ourselves up in our minds as more than we are. When we strip away the illusions we may have created about ourselves, we remember that we are no more deserving of whatever good fortune we may have or desire than anyone else is. We are no more deserving of being seen or heard than anyone else.

Chametz comes to symbolize the parts of who we've been that are not nourishing us but rather keep us from our fullest flourishing. Just as we seek those crumbs in the dark, with a candle, we are called to look within ourselves for the *spiritual* chametz that lurks in our psyches, attitudes, and habits. The almost comical search for cheerios hidden in corners of our living rooms is meant to call us into a willingness to find and confront the spiritual and emotional chametz that we must hold up to the light of the flame that burns *within*—and let it go. If you haven't ever done b'dikat chametz ever, or if you haven't

done it since your kids were young, I suggest you get your candle out because this odd ritual does us some good as part of a two-step process of calling our attention to the removal of our personal chametz.

We know there will be new crumbs—of course, from matzah, but also once the matza is vacuumed out of the carpets after Pesach and we go back to eating chametz. But the act of seeking it, naming it, and releasing now it is an act of purification akin to a sacrificial offering. It is no coincidence that chametz also was prohibited from being offered or and consumed in the Temple. Selling our chametz before Pesach is a key part of the spiritual act of release.

I find it fascinating that the command not to own chametz carries greater weight than the command to eat matzah. We tend to focus less about what we *won't* have during Pesach when we're preoccupied with what will fill that void, scurrying around for the foods we plan to eat during Pesach. Selling our chametz seems silly on its face, a quirky legal fiction that we don't own what's in our cabinets or in boxes in the basement. But spiritually it is a real and significant part of preparing to sit at the Seder, truly present in the moment that our rabbis curated for us some 2,000 year ago. It is the first step we take to live into what not having chametz is supposed to do for us spiritually.

Many Jews add related practices to this, like cleaning the entire house—every drawer, curtain, and bed ruffle (I used to do that, Heaven help me!)—or not doing Pesadik food magic—that is to say, not attempting to defy the laws of ground -up matzah in service of the creation of popovers, cakes, or other puffy foods. I'm not saying you should go that far, although personally, I'm into the "no food magic" practice.

For us, today, I just want to raise up the idea of bringing intention to getting rid of chametz—and doing it, not by throwing away food (God forbid), but by giving it away if that's an option for you, or by selling it. It's rare for me to come out strongly and urge you to take on a particular practice, but this year I'm pushing you to sell your chametz. After Shabbat, if you have not done so already, I invite you to hit the link in our weekly enews and make me your agent to sell your chametz. There's room to make stipulations if you need to. I am far less concerned about how you work out the details in your own home than I am eager for us to do this exercise as a community, because I truly believe that in that simple move, we help ourselves prepare to be worthy of our liberation. Shabbat shalom.