

Text Study: Bedikat Chametz



Products containing leavened grain are known as *chametz*. Prior to Pesach, Jews clean extensively and remove *chametz* from their homes. From sources as early as the Talmud, we learn that *chametz* has a spiritual significance as well as a physical one.

After saying the blessing before study, please read this text and discuss the questions below.

יְהִי רְצוֹן מִלְּפָנֶיךָ ה' אֱלֹהֵי וְאֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתַי שְׂפָשֵׁם שְׂאֵנִי מִבְּעֵר(ת) חֶמֶץ מִבֵּיתִי
וּתְנֵי כֵן אִזְכָּה לְבַעַר אֶת יֵצֶר הָרַע מִלִּבִּי, וְכֵן תְּבַעַר אֶת כָּל הָרְשָׁעָה מִן הָאָרֶץ.
וַיִּמְרָשׁ

Adonai, our God and God of our ancestors, just as I have removed all chametz from my home and from my ownership, so may I evict the evil inclination from my heart, and may You dislodge all evil from the earth.

Rabbinical Assembly Haggadah, 1982

1. In addition to removing physical chametz, what else does the meditation ask to be removed?
2. How does the meditation broaden the understanding of *chametz*?

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The source of this understanding of *chametz* comes from a Talmudic passage. Rashi commented that “yeast in the dough” is something that keeps people from doing God’s will. Look at Rashi’s comment and answer the questions that follow.

שֹׁאֵר שְׁבַעֲסָה - יֵצֵר הָרַע שְׁבִלְכָנוּ.

The yeast in the dough, that is to say the evil inclination (*yetzer ha’ra*).

Rashi’s Comment on Brachot 17a

3. How is the *yetzer hara* like yeast? What properties do they share?

Haviva Ner-David builds on the comparison between *chametz* and the *yetzer hara* in an essay from *The Women’s Passover Companion*. The following is a selection from that essay.

So there I was, doing a thorough spring-cleaning before Pesach, much as my mother had done before me. And much to my surprise, I did not find it as burdensome as I had imagined it would be. In fact, I found it quite spiritually powerful—even transforming. As I sorted, wiped, and scoured, I felt a spiritual cleansing taking place within me. Although I was engaged in an activity I had seen as an expression of women’s servitude, I felt myself being psychologically and spiritually freed, much like the Jewish slaves were after they left Egypt. . .

. . . I turned to the *Zohar*, a mystical commentary on the Bible that is the central text of Kabbalah. There I found much material to validate what I had experienced. In its commentary on *parashat Tizaveh*, the *Zohar* associates *chametz* with the *yetzer harah*, the evil inclination and *avodah zarah*, idol worship: “And such is the evil inclination like yeast in dough, because it enters into the insides of a person, slowly, slowly, and then it multiplies and grows more and more until all of the body becomes enmeshed in it. And that is idol worship, which is likened to the evil inclination.” As we ride our homes of *chametz* we are ridding ourselves of the evil inclination, of all the drives that we are preventing us from being who we strive to be. . .

4. What elements of Ner-David’s comparison between *chametz* and *yetzer hara* are similar to the ones you mentioned earlier? What would you add?

5. On Rosh Hashana we do a spiritual accounting (*cheshbon hanefesh*), and we symbolically “caste out” our misdeeds at *tashlich* with pieces of bread. The search for and removal of *chametz* at Pesach also provides an opportunity to find and remove our internal *chametz*. Can you think of one “piece of internal *chametz*” you might like to get rid of this year? (Share this only if you feel comfortable.)

Read the text below to learn how Ner-David creates another layer to the Pesach ritual to help her clean out internal *chametz*.

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On that note, I would like to share a personal custom of a ritual that I perform each year before Pesach. As I clean I compile a list of all my own personal spiritual and psychological *chametz*—the things that keep me enslaved to my evil inclination, the foibles that I hold on to that keep me from total, unencumbered, unfettered faith in the Almighty, the things that prevent me from being what I would like to or could be. Then, when I burn the *chametz* on the eve of Pesach, I toss that list into the fire and watch it burn.

Haviva Ner-David
“Thoughts on Cleaning for Pesach”
The Women’s Passover Companion
Anisfeld, Mohr, Spector, eds.
Jewish Lights, 2003

6. How does Haviva Ner-David adapt the traditional ritual of removing *chametz* to incorporate the more internal and personal understanding of *chametz*? In what ways might you find this an interesting addition to the ritual designed to help each of us rid internal *chametz*?

7. One addition that some Jews make to the traditional steps of bedikat hametz is to follow the meditation in the haggadah with a personal meditation. What words did you read, speak or hear during this text study that you would want to include in a personal meditation to support you in the ridding of internal *chametz*?