

Torah Table Talk – *Shabbat HaHodesh*

The Meaning of *Hametz* and *Matzah*

Parshat VaYakhel/Pekudei, Exodus 35:1-40:38

Shabbat HaHodesh, Exodus 12:1-20, Ezekiel 45:16-46:18

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Shabbat Ha-Hodesh occurs on the Sabbath just before *Rosh Hodesh Nisan* as a reminder that the time has come to prepare for Passover, if we have not yet done so. The special *Torah* portion for this *Shabbat* begins, “This month shall be for you the beginning of months.” (Exodus 12:1) Israel’s liberation from slavery began with the commandment to celebrate *Rosh Hodesh*. When the people took charge of their calendar, they also took charge of their lives. The *Torah* portion goes on to describe the first Passover: a lamb was set aside on the tenth day of the month; it was to be sacrificed on the eve of the fifteenth day with its blood placed on the doorposts of their homes. The people are commanded to eat Passover sacrifice, with “your loins girded, sandals on your feet, and a staff in your hand.” Along with a flurry of household preparations, we ought to open the *Haggadah* and begin thinking about its meaning for our day. Symbols, are often more complex than we realize. We will begin this *Shabbat* by exploring the symbolism of *Hametz* and *Matzah*.

Exodus 12:15, 20 Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread; on the very first day you shall remove leaven (*se’or*) from your houses, for whosoever eats leavened bread (*hametz*) from the first day to the seventh day, that person shall be cut off from Israel...You shall eat nothing leavened; in your settlements you shall eat unleavened bread.

Deuteronomy 16:3-4 You shall not anything leavened with it; for seven days thereafter you shall eat unleavened bread, bread of distress (*lechem oni*) – for you departed from the land of Egypt hurriedly – so that you may remember the days of your departing all the days of your life. For seven days no leaven shall be found with you in your territory...

Leviticus 2:11 No grain offering that you offer to the Lord shall be made with leaven, for no leaven or honey may be turned into smoke as a gift to the Lord. (*This is a general prohibition against leaven in grain offerings and not just on Passover*)

PaRDeS

1. *P’shat* – Understanding the plain sense meaning of the text

Remove leaven: Leaven, Hebrew *se’or*, is the leavening agent known as sourdough; leavened food, Hebrew *hametz*, is food to which sourdough has been added to accelerate the rising of the dough. The term traditionally also includes the...five species of grain that are subject to fermentation as they decompose (*wheat, barley, emmer, rye and oats*) No reason is given for the prohibition of leaven. Verses 34 and 39 intimate that it is in reenactment of the original circumstances at the time of the Exodus, when the Israelites left Egypt in haste, before the dough they had prepared could rise. However, since leaven is also forbidden with certain types of sacrifices that are wholly unconnected with the Passover, it must be banned on other grounds, perhaps because of its use in some pagan rite...No instructions are given as to the manner in which *hametz* is to be “removed.” (*Nahum M. Sarna, The JPS Torah Commentary Exodus*)

My Commentary: The prohibition of *hametz* is not as simple or as obvious as it may first seem. While we understand why we eat *matzah*, the reason for the prohibition against *hametz* is more mysterious. The *Torah* says, “And they baked unleavened cakes of the dough that they had taken 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) And yet the night before the people had consumed *matzah* along with the *Pesah* offering and bitter herbs. The people were not under duress and there did not seem to be any reason to explain eating *matzah* before they left Egypt. It would appear that the people already knew what *matzah* was. In the *Haggadah* (and Deuteronomy), we refer to *matzah* as *lechem oni* or *lachma anya*, the bread of affliction/poverty, implying that this was the food that slaves and prisoners ate. Professor Sarna claims that

hametz may have had some cultic significance since it was forbidden to bake *hametz* offerings in the temple. So what, then, is the meaning of *hametz*?

2. **Remez – Allusions: Finding meanings hidden in the text**

This was the prayer of Rabbi Hamnuna, and (some say) Rabbi Alexandri on concluding his prayer used to add the following: Sovereign of the Universe, You know full well that it is our will to obey your will, and what prevents us? It is **the yeast in the dough** and the oppression of the nations. May it be Your will to deliver us from their hands, so that we may return to perform the statutes of Your will with a perfect heart! (*Babylonian Talmud Berachot 17a*)

The yeast in the dough: This is the evil inclination which causes our hearts to ferment. (*Rashi, commenting on Berachot 17a*)

Many commentators, including Rabbi Moshe Alshich (1508-1593, Safed), Rabbi Isaiah Ha-Levi Horowitz (1565-1630), and the Zohar, claim that *hametz* is an allusion (*remez*) to physical desire and a symbol of the evil inclination, as the sages have said, “Sovereign of the Universe, You know full well that it is our will to perform Your will. What prevents us? It is the yeast in the dough.” The *Torah* says, “You shall observe (the feast of) *matzot*.” Do not read this as *matzot* but as *mitzvot*! The Passover offering is a symbol of the *Torah*. The word comes from the expression *peh sach*, fluent tongue. I cannot go into this matter at length but to ignore it is impossible. (*Rabbi Yedidiah Tiah Weil, Introduction, Haggadat HaMarbeh Lisaper*)

Turning one’s back on all forms of leaven (*hametz*) became a central metaphor for escaping slavery....In an expansion of the metaphor, *hametz* became a symbol of what is allowed to stand around. *Hametz* signified staleness and deadening routine; getting rid of it became a symbol of freshness and life growth. Since Passover occurs in the spring, the total cleaning of the house to eliminate leaven was easily expanded to the comprehensive spring cleaning. Throwing out accumulated staleness and the dead hand of winter, cleaning the house and changing the utensils became a backdrop for reenacting emancipation. Thus, house cleaning became part of a cosmic process. (*Rabbi Irving Greenberg The Jewish Way: Living the Holidays, P. 41*)

My Commentary: We see, here, a thread of interpretation, beginning with the Talmud, in which *hametz* takes on a new meaning. The Talmud sees *hametz* as a symbol of the ‘evil inclination,’ the source of moral and spiritual servitude. The evil inclination, of course is not inherently bad. The sages were the earliest psychologists – the evil inclination sounds a lot like the human id. They saw it as a necessary part of human nature. It has the potential to be a destructive source in the world when it goes unchecked or a power force in building society when it is used with discipline. We can be enslaved both by our inner desires and drives and by the outer world: the inclination to do evil and the oppression of the larger world. But what was it that led the sages to this conclusion about *hametz*? *Hametz* has the effect of causing dough to become puffed up and bloated – much like arrogance. Fermenting involves becoming sour and spoiled. Rabbi Greenberg offers another take on *hametz* – it is those things that have become stale. Passover then is a time for starting anew.

3. **Din – Law: Applying the text to life**

Why is this night different from all other nights? The four statements of the *Mah Nishtanah* are all interconnected. We have seen that *Matzah* symbolizes important principles and ideas that should not leave our minds for even a second – so why should we set aside one night from all others to contemplate these great principles? If the meaning of *Matzah* is so significant, we should refrain from eating *Hametz* and eat *Matzah* all year long so that we can think about its meaning. And if one says that the reason this night was set apart from all other nights is because it was on Passover that it is the night on which the pure faith in God was born, then why do we also eat bitter herbs; *Maror* appears to have nothing to do with faith; it reminds us of the bitterness we experienced in Egypt. The *Seder* should focus on celebration and not sorrow...we should focus on our liberation and freedom and not on slavery. On the other hand, if we are supposed to express sorrow for the grief and suffering we have experienced, then why include the other practices in the *Mah Nishtanah*: leaning when we eat and dipping twice. Both of these practices are celebratory rather than remembrances of our suffering. The *Talmud* relates the story of Rabbi Nachman and his servant, Doru. Rabbi Nachman asked him on Pesach eve what a servant should do if his master not only frees his servant but also rewards him with great wealth. Doru answered: “He should thank him and praise him.” Rabbi Nachman then told Doru, “You have exempted us from saying the *Mah Nishtanah*” and he continued with *Avadim Hayyinu*. (*Pesachim 117a*)

Why did Doru's answer exempt Rabbi Nachman from reciting the *Mah Nishtanah*? We learn from this story that the purpose of *Mah Nishtanah* is to encourage us to praise and give thanksgiving to God for all God's acts of beneficence. That is why there are so many different practices that help us to remember the miracles and wonders which took place when God brought us from slavery to freedom....On *Pesach* not only do we have *Matzah* and *Maror* but we lean and we have many other customs that help us recall the Exodus. These practices encourage us to tell the story of the Exodus in all its details. The purpose of the *Mah Nishtanah* – mentioning the practices of the *Seder* - is to encourage us to give thanks and praise God just as Doru told his master, Rabbi Nachman. We multiply the customs at the *Seder*, then, to encourage children to ask questions and to praise God even more! (*Rabbi Benjamin David Rabinowitz, Ephod Bad -1872*)

My Commentary: The core question of *Mah Nishtanah* is, “Why do we focus on these four symbols at the beginning of the *Seder*. We don't ask about drinking four cups of wine, washing our hands twice (we usually do so only once), or even reading the *Haggadah* in the middle of dinner. There are, in fact, many symbols and actions about which we could have asked questions at the *Seder*. We don't question the practice of eating *matzah* or avoiding *hametz* until much later in the *Seder*. And then, we frame the question and answer a little differently: “For what purpose do we eat matzah? The Holy One revealed Himself to us even before the dough had a chance to ferment.” In other words, it was not our haste in leaving Egypt but God's haste in revealing Himself to us and Egypt that gives the *matzah* its meaning! Rabbi Rabinowitz struggles with the meaning of symbols: is their purpose to celebrate or commemorate? *Matza* (and *hametz*) are presented as symbols of faith while the *maror* is a historic reminder. All the symbols, however, inspire questions. In the Talmudic story, it is lovely and just a bit ironic that Doru, the slave, helps Rabbi Nachman fulfill his obligation on Passover night. Rabbi Nachman is the child who asks questions and Doru is the teacher!

4. Sod – Plumbing the Text to Encounter the Mysteries of Faith

On the eve of Passover we remove the last remnants of bread and cake from our homes and throw it into a fire to show that we have rid our lives of *hametz*. Not only are we forbidden to eat *hametz*, but we cannot even claim ownership of it. We sell whatever remains in our home by entering into a contract with a non-Jew who purchases left over *hametz* foodstuffs, utensil and dishes still in our possession. (Speak to your local rabbi to arrange for the sale of *hametz*). We go to great extremes to rid ourselves of *hametz*, pouring boiling water over our counter tops and covering our shelves with foil. But what is really going on here? Our interaction with the outer world is meant to be a reflection of our inner state of being. *Hametz* becomes a potent symbol; it is more than a historical reminder of the Exodus. We cannot become free until we get rid of the stuff that is holding us back. There is a parallel here between *Tachlich*, the custom of casting away one's sins at a body of water on *Rosh Hashanah* and the burning of *hametz* on Passover eve. Both are acts of purging in order to renew one's life. And both, I would argue, are powerful symbols of *Teshuvah*, repentance. Passover, then, is more than a story of liberation from the external forces that enslave us; to become free, the Israel had to free themselves from the inner forces which cause us to go sour or become puffed up. Of course we can never rid ourselves of these forces completely any more than we can rid ourselves of an ego. But once a year we undergo a process of inner and outer spring cleaning. Finally, I would like to share with you a poem entitled **Biur Hametz** I wrote some years ago as a meditation on the search for Hametz:

The smoke rises up,
Acrid, in my nostrils.
It leaves behind
The tell tale smell of destruction.

These weeks culminate
As we rejoice.
Having cleansed our homes
And our hearts,
We begin the journey
From slavery to liberation.

What do I leave behind?
Envy and enmity,
Staleness and stubbornness,
Arrogance and avarice.

They burn so easily, so readily
But the smoke gets in our clothes
And in our hair.
We need to wash it away
again and again.

The yeast in the dough, you say?
But what would bread be without it?
And what would life be without desire?

Yet once a year we start anew,
Knowing full well that *Hametz* will return
As the days pass and our resolve weakens

Questions to Ponder

1. Did you know that there is a certain amount of 'fudge room' in Jewish dietary laws? A small amount of *treif* (1/60th) that inadvertently falls into kosher food does not make the kosher food un-kosher. This is not so with Passover – even a little *hametz* is unacceptable. Why are the laws of Hametz and Matzah more stringent than any of the other dietary laws in Judaism?
2. In what ways are the evil inclination (*yetzer hara*) and hametz similar to one another? What led the sages to make this comparison?
3. How does the *Mah Nishtanah* inspire us to give thanks?
4. What inner qualities or habits would you describe as *hametz* in your life? What would you like to cast into the fire along with the left over hametz on Passover eve?
5. Matzah is described as the bread of affliction and also a symbol of liberation? Can you think of other symbols – Jewish and otherwise – that have two contradictory meanings?
6. What other questions would you like to ask at the beginning of the Seder (besides when do we eat)?

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ⁱ Mechilta, Parshat 9 and Exodus 12:17