



## The Pardes Parsha Discussion by Rabbi Alex Israel

### Tzav: What's Wrong with *Hametz*?

Did you know that *hametz* is not merely forbidden on *Pesach*?! It is also disqualified from the Temple altar. In last week's *parsha* we read:

No meal offering that you offer to the Lord shall be with leaven [*hametz*], for you shall burn no leaven [*se'or*] or honey in any fire offering to the Lord. (Lev. 2:11)

It appears again this week in *Parshat Tzav*.

And the remainder [of the meal offering] shall be eaten by Aaron and his sons; it shall be eaten as unleavened cake [*matzot*] in the sacred precinct...It shall not be baked with leaven... (Lev. 6:9-10)

**Why is *hametz* a problem? Please discuss:**

- We have a *mitzva* of *matza* because we emerged from Egypt speedily. But why is leaven forbidden?
- Why do we scour our kitchens and expunge all leaven from our homes?
- Why is *hametz* a problem on *Pesach*?

#### APPROACH 1. THE *YETZER HARA*

Rabbi Alexandri would end his daily prayers with the following supplication: 'Master of the Universe, you know full well that it is our desire to act according to your will; but what prevents us from doing so? - the yeast in the dough...' (*Talmud Brachot* 17a)

In the Torah, two terms are used to designate leaven. One term is *se'or*, the other is *hametz*. What is the difference between them? *Se'or* is a leavening agent. It is a piece of old dough, sourdough, that has fermented. This substance is quite inedible, but when sourdough (*se'or*) is kneaded with a mixture of flour and water, it accelerates the rising process and creates *hametz*.

Rabbi Alexandri views *se'or* as a metaphor for the powerful drives and inflammatory passions that lurk within us all. Our mind has the ability to distort the reality of our vision, inflate our desires and draw us in directions that we would never take if we were to follow only our rational side. The impulse to evil ferments and corrupts. It makes flour and water appear as soft, warm, enticing bread. *Hametz* is the evil inclination! It is the “yeast in the dough” that allows us to lose self-control, which invites irrational decisions and leads us to impropriety.

This powerful metaphor of the *yetzer hara* explains well the impropriety of *hametz* on God's altar – for we stand before God in truth and sobriety.

## APPROACH 2. HUMAN INGENUITY

The Netziv – Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Berlin (Russia: Volozhin 1817-1893) – in his commentary *Ha'amek Davar* takes the theology of *hametz* in almost a completely reverse direction. He suggests that significance of *hametz* lies in the exercise of human control rather than the loss of it. He also explains why this law applies specifically to the sacrificial altar and to the holiday of Passover.

Scripture calls all substances which have a sweetening effect ‘honey’ because honey is the classic sweetener. As for leaven, “*se'or*” is a human manipulation of natural state of God's universe. It is an exercise of human machination. God warns us not to use these in the Temple, as the closer one finds oneself to God, the less room there is for human ingenuity.

He refers us to his commentary to Exodus 13:3 where he states:

LEAVEN MAY NOT BE EATEN [on Passover]...Matza takes no advantage of the human technological ingenuity and creativity which allows man to raise the dough more than simple flour and water which are created by God. Hametz is the epitome of human manipulation of nature. Thus Unleaven is the symbol of the survival and ongoing existence of the Jewish People as they survive solely through the spirit of God.

Here, the raising agent (*se'or*) and its product (*hametz*) are viewed as an expression of human interference in nature. Conversely, *matza* is an expression of the world controlled exclusively by God. The human discovery of breadmaking was a major

advancement in food technology, a classic human manipulation of the elements of nature. Most of the time, advancement of civilization is welcomed by the Torah. This creativity and ingenuity is the “divine” in humanity, our “image of God.” Humans imitate God’s creativity!

However, in the Temple – the place where God’s presence is most palpably manifest – there is no place for man’s creative spirit. In the Temple, man is dwarfed by God. The altar of God is no place for human food technology. On the altar, we dedicate all the elements of God’s world – animal, vegetable, and mineral – recognizing and demonstrating that God is the source of them all. *Hametz* – the product of human manufacture – has no place there. It would be presumptuous.

Similarly, on the festival of the miraculous birth of our nation, when an entire nation walked to their freedom away from a tyrannical regime without lifting a finger of their own, we commemorate the power of God. God performed the ten plagues and we had no hand in them. At the Red Sea, the people stood huddled together, terrified in the face of the imposing Egyptian army, and God saved the day.

Our rejection of *hametz* – withdrawing from our most basic commodity, bread – proclaims loudly that the very essence of our being comes directly and completely from God.

**Please discuss these ideas:**

Ask your family and guests whether these interpretations answer the question in the context of 1. The Temple and 2. *Pesach*.

- Ask participants if they can share another explanation; there are many others!
- And if you are not satisfied with the answers, you have a week until the *sefer* to research an answer!

Shabbat Shalom and Hag Kasher Vesameach!