

Sell It, Burn It, or Throw It Away: The Psychologies of Getting Rid of Hametz

I. What Does the Torah Have Against Yeast?

Exodus 12:15

Seven days you shall eat *matzot*, but by [lit., on] the first day you shall eliminate leaven from your homes, because anyone who eats hametz from the first day until the seventh day shall be cut from Israel.

שמות יב:טו
שבעת ימים מצות תאכלו
אך ביום הראשון תשביתו שאר מִבֵּיתְכֶם
כי כל אכל חֶמֶץ וְנִכְרְתָה הַנֶּפֶשׁ הַהוּא
מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל מִיּוֹם הָרִאשׁוֹן עַד יוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי:

Exodus 12:19

Seven days leaven shall not be found in your houses, for anyone who eats something leavened will be cut off from the community of Israel, whether a foreigner or a citizen of the land.

שמות יב:יט
שבעת ימים שאר לא ימצא בבתיכם כי כל אכל
מחמץ ונִכְרְתָה הַנֶּפֶשׁ הַהוּא מֵעַדֹת יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּגֵר
וּבְאֶזְרַח הָאֶרֶץ:

Exodus 13:7

Matzot shall be eaten for seven days; hametz shall not be seen by you, nor shall leaven be seen by you, in all your territory.

שמות יג:ז
מצות יאכל את שבעת הימים ולא יראה לך חֶמֶץ
ולא יראה לך שאר בכל גְּבֻלְךָ:

- Does the requirement to only eat *matzot* necessarily entail destruction of all leaven and leavening agents before Pesah? If not, why might the Torah command the Israelites to "eliminate leaven" before Pesah?
- What do you think the Torah means by "eliminating" leaven? What do the requirements that leaven not be found or seen add to that requirement?

Leviticus 2:11

No cereal-offering [*minhah*] that you offer to the Lord shall be made leavened, for you must not turn into smoke any leaven or any honey as a food gift to the Lord.

ויקרא ב:יא
כל המנחה אשר תקריבו ליקח לא תעשה חֶמֶץ
כי כל שאר וכל דבש לא תקטירו ממנו אִשָּׁה
ליקח:

Jacob Milgrom, Anchor Bible: Leviticus, pp. 188-89

Fermentation is equivalent to decay and corruption and for this reason is prohibited on the altar. . . . Leaven [was regarded] as the arch-symbol of fermentation, deterioration, and death an, hence, taboo on the altar of blessing and life.

William Henry Propp, Anchor Bible: Exodus, p. 433 (emphasis added)

Leaven in particular is fraught with poignant, multivalent symbolism. Leavening entrails both putrefaction and growth, death and life; its pungent odor reaches every corner of the house. . . . During the week of Unleavened Bread, not just the home but the entire land of Israel becomes like a vast altar, leaven-free.

II. The Many Means of Hametz Disposal

Tosefta Pesahim 1:7

At first, they used to say: One may not sell hametz to a non-Jew, nor give it to him as a gift, unless there was sufficient time for him to eat it before the time of destruction [on the morning of the 14th of Nissan].

Until R. Akiva came along and taught that one may sell or give hametz as a gift to a non-Jew even at the moment of its destruction.

R. Yosi said: The former are the words of Beit Shammai and the latter are the words of Beit Hillel; R. Akiva argued in support of Beit Hillel's position.

תוספתא פסחים א:ז

בראשונה היו אומ': אין מוכרין חמץ לנכרי ואין נותנין לו במתנה אלא כדי שיאכלנו עד שלא תגיע שעת הביעור
עד שבא ר' עקיבא ולמד שמוכרין ונותנין מתנה אף בשעת הביעור
אמ' ר' יוסה אילו דברי בית שמיי ואלו דברי בית הלל; הכריע ר' עקיבא לסייע דברי בית הלל

- Why might one side of this dispute require selling hametz to a non-Jew such that he could or will eat it before it must be destroyed, and why might the other side not care about that?

Mishnah Pesahim 2:1

The whole time it is permitted to eat hametz [i.e., until noon on *erev Pesah*], one may feed it to domesticated or wild animals or chickens, and/or sell it to a non-Jew and benefit from the money. Once that time has passed, however, all benefit becomes forbidden.

Nor may one light one's oven or stove with hametz.

R. Yehudah says: Destruction of hametz can only be accomplished through burning.

But the **Sages** say: One may even crumble it up and throw it into the wind or toss it in the sea.

משנה פסחים ב:א

כל שעה שמותר לאכול מאכיל לבהמה לחיה ולעופות ומוכרו לנכרי ומותר בהנאתו עבר זמנו אסור בהנאתו
ולא יסיק בו תנור וכירים
רבי יהודה אומר: אין ביעור חמץ אלא שריפה
וחכמים אומרים: אף מפרר וזורר לרוח או מטיל לים:

- What do you think is the core of the dispute over the method of getting rid of hametz? What's the difference whether it is burned or just thrown away?
- Which position from the Tosefta above does the Mishnah adopt regarding when one may sell hametz to a non-Jew? Does that position cohere with both R. Yehudah and the Sages, or does it work better with one or the other of them?

III. What Did the Torah Mean Exactly?

Mekhilta of R. Shimon b. Yohai 12:15

"Eliminate leaven from your homes" – through burning.

If, however, the time for destroying [leaven] has arrived but no flame is available to burn it, crumble it up and throw it to the wind or toss in the sea for the fishes.

R. Yehudah says: [No,] one must wait until one arrives in a settled area and burn it. R. Yehudah himself used to say: The *mitzvah* of eliminating leaven can only be accomplished through burning.

He argued as follows: If leftover sacrificial meat [which is forbidden to eat but] whose presence is not forbidden, nevertheless requires burning, shouldn't *hametz*, whose presence is forbidden, also require burning?

The sages responded to him: Any argument of this nature which initially leads to a stringent ruling but ultimately results in a lenient one is invalid.

After all, someone who doesn't have access to a flame to burn it would have to hold on to *hametz*, thereby transgressing the prohibition of having *hametz* in one's possession on Passover! The Torah, therefore, said:

"Eliminate leaven from your houses" any way you can!

- According to this text, everyone prefers that *hametz* be burnt rather than disposed in any other way. Why do you think they prefer that to other methods of disposal? And why might R. Yehudah think burning is so important that it's worth transgressing the prohibition on owning *hametz* on Passover?

Mekhilta of R. Yishmael Pisha 8

R. Yosi says: "Eliminate leaven from your homes" – through burning. . .

. I learn this by comparison with leftover sacrificial meat, with which it shares four characteristics: it is forbidden to eat it, it is forbidden to economically benefit from it, one is cut off for violating these prohibitions, and it is time-sensitive. Thus, since leftover sacrificial meat must be destroyed by burning, so too *hametz* must be destroyed by burning.

R. Yehudah b. Beteira responded: You think you are being stringent, when in reality you are being lenient! If someone couldn't find a flame, are they to hold onto the *hametz* until they can burn it? Rather, the following is the proper ruling: Before the last minute to destroy it, the ideal way to get rid of it is through burning; but once the last minute to destroy it arrives, the ideal thing to do is to get rid of it anyway you can.

R. Yehudah haNasi says: [No,] one needs to destroy it with something that completely eliminates its presence. And what is something that completely eliminates its presence? Burning is the only possible answer.

- Besides the four technical characteristics that leaven shares with leftover sacrificial meat, can you think of a substantive connection between them?
- The debate between R. Yosi and R. Yehudah b. Beteira is essentially the same as what we saw above. But what does R. Yehudah haNasi add to the argument?

מכילתא דרבי שמעון בר יוחאי יב:טו

"תשביתו שאר מבתים" – בשריפה.

הגיעה שעת ביעור ולא ניתמנה לו האור שישרפנו מפרר וזורה לרוח או מטיל לים לדגים.

ר' יהודה או': ממתין עד שיגיע לישוב וישרפנו, שהיה ר' יהודה או' אין מצות השבתתו אלא שריפה.

והרי דין: ומה נותר שאין כתוב עליו בל יראה ובל ימצא טעון שריפה חמץ שכתוב עליו בל יראה ובל ימצא אין דין שיטען שריפה?

אמרו לו לר' יהודה: כל דין שאתה דן תחילתו להחמיר וסופו להקל אינו דין. הרי, מי שלא

ניתמנה לו אור לשורפו יהא יושב ומשמרו ויהיה עובר עליו משום בל יראה ובל ימצא,

והתורה אמרה "תשביתו שאר מבתים" – משביתו אתה בכל דבר!

מכילתא דרבי ישמעאל פסחא ח

רבי יוסי אומר: "תשביתו שאור מבתים" – בשריפה. . . אדון ארבעה לשונות כאחת מד' לשונות כאחת.

נותר אסור באכילה ואסור בהנאה וחייבין עליו כרת. והזמן גרם. וחמץ

אסור באכילה ואסור בהנאה. וחייבין עליו כרת והזמן גרם. . . אם למדת על נותר שאינו אלא

בשריפה. אף חמץ לא יהיה אלא בשריפה.

אמר לו ר' יהודה **בן בתירה**: סבור אתה שאתה מחמיר עליו, ואינך אלא מקל עליו! הא אם לא

מצא אור, ישב לו ולא ישרוף?! אלא בלשון הזה הוא אומר: עד שלא תגיע שעת הביעור

מצות כילוי בשריפה; משהגיעה שעת הביעור מצות כילוי בכל דבר.

רבי אומר: בדבר שהוא בכל יראה ובל ימצא. ואי זה הוא דבר שהוא בכל יראה ובל ימצא?

אין אתה מוצא אלא בשריפה.

IV. What We Get Rid of Nowadays, and How

1. Weapons



Weapons Become the Flame of Peace in Mali

3000 rifles, kalashnikovs and rocket launchers become the Flame of Peace in Timbuktu, Mali, in March 1996. Rebels voluntarily laid down their arms in exchange for a peaceful integration into civil society.

Photo: United Nations Development Programme, 1996

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/unitednationsdevelopmentprogramme/8904895089>

Symbolic weapons-burning ceremony in Congo Brazzaville, <http://www.afrol.com/articles/18515>

At dusk, Mr Annan and the Congolese President set fire to a pile of armaments which had been collected from various militias after civil strife, which ended in 2003. Flames shot into the Brazzaville sky. The destroyed arms totalled 80,000 pieces of ammunition, 800 weapons and 500 grenades.

The ceremony was announced as "one of the landmarks" on the Central African country's road to peace after a decade of bloody civil war. In remarks, the UN Secretary-General expressed a wish that the flame would be "a symbol of hope reborn for the Congolese people and an inspiration for all the peoples who continue to be the victims of armed conflict in Africa and elsewhere."

"The process has been put in motion, now we must maintain it. That means progress must also be made on the other elements of the national programme for the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration of the former combatants," Mr Annan said at the ceremony.

2. Addictive Substances

Ceremonies for Spiritual Healing and Growth, Ch. 4: The Commitment to Stop Smoking, by Henry Close

A ceremony can be a very powerful embodiment of the principles of surrender and of commitment to a new approach to life. The ceremony presented here is for people who have had difficulty transcending their addiction to tobacco. It might be adapted to address other addictions as well. An appropriate time and place are chosen. Ideally, the ceremony is held out of doors, in a place where things can be buried in the ground. One's yard is probably not a good place, since you want to put as much distance as possible between yourself and cigarettes. Bring to the ceremony a shovel and a large rock. . . . The leader then continues: "I have asked Ploni to bring some things with him today: cigarettes, ashtrays, and other objects related to smoking. . . . I would like for us now to participate together in digging a hole in which to bury these things, putting them away forever." Every person removes a shovelful of dirt from the hole. "Now, Ploni, would you place all these symbols of addiction in the ground, to distance yourself from them, to remove them from your life." (He does so.) "You are first one, Ploni, to throw some dirt on those things." (He does so.)