

Making Pesach Personal

In every generation we are obligated to show that we personally have just gone out from the slavery of Egypt. This is the meaning of the verse: "*God took us out from there, etc.*" (Deuteronomy 6:23). And regarding this, God commanded us: "*Remember that you were a slave.*" In other words, **it should be as though you personally were a slave and went out to freedom and were redeemed.** [Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhoh Hametz U-Matzah 7:6*]

From the Sefat Emet (R. Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter of Gur, 1847-1905):

The truth is that one need only clarify it through faith, and the [word] *sippur* [story] [is used here] in the sense of clarification and explicit uncovering, that in each and every generation there is an **Exodus from Egypt relevant to that generation**, and all of that occurred at the time of the Exodus from Egypt. And in accordance with a person's faith that he is like one who had come out [from Egypt], this aspect is revealed and he feels the present Exodus from Egypt, and each individual can escape his own straits (*metzarim = Mitzrayim*).

"And it came to pass over those many days that the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned because of their bondage, and they cried out, and their cry rose up to God from the bondage" (Exodus 2:23):

On this verse, my grandfather and teacher commented that before the king died, they were so sunk in exile that they didn't even feel the exile. But now began, a little bit, the process of redemption, now that they became aware of their exile and groaned [because of it]...

And surely in every exile there are many levels. This is the meaning of "[God] frees the prisoners," "delivers the humble," and "helps the poor"—these are three aspects of exile. The middle rung are those who are imprisoned in exile; they are unable to broaden out that point of divine life that is within them. Of them it is said that they need to be "brought out of prison." "Delivers the humble" refers to the righteous, who themselves are not really in exile; they remain there for the common good, as with Moses. Moses was a "shepherd" preparing for the redemption, meaning that he was not himself in exile, rather just preparing to redeem Israel...Of these it is said, "delivers the humble." And "helps the poor" refers to those who are so low that that they don't feel at all the exile, and these need a great liberation...

Something like this is found with every exile. **And even more than that, it seems that in every person there are found all of these levels.** There is in every Jew an aspect in which s/he is a free person. After the going out of Egypt, there is a portion of freedom in every Jew, and it is this aspect that helps the person, and is a preparation for redemption. That which is true of the people as a whole is true of each individual person as well.

Rabbi Michael Strassfeld (*The Jewish Holidays: A Guide & Commentary*):

Why is this night different from all other nights? Most of all because it provokes us to question. We are to question our cherished notions and beliefs to discover if somehow slavery and oppression have crept in...The importance of questioning explains the central role of children at the seder. Young and naïve, they ask the basic questions, the ones we thought long settled or the ones so challenging to fundamentals that we could never risk asking them...We should locate each of [the four] questioning children in ourselves. As Maimonides states, "If he has no child, then let his wife ask him [the Four Questions]; if

he has no wife, then let one person ask the other even if they are all sages. If he is alone, then he asks himself, "Why is this night different?"

On Matzah and Hametz

Hametz is checked for by lamp-light on the night of the fourteenth. It is unnecessary to check any place into which hametz is not brought. (Mishnah Pesachim 1:1)

Hametz is checked for by lamp-light on the night of the fourteenth – the search is not performed by sunlight or moonlight, but by **lamp light**. Even though there is no proof-text for this, there is a hint of it: *God's lamp is humanity's soul* (Proverbs 20). (Tosefta Pesachim 1:1)

Releasing "false-self" and judgment of others

I've been experiencing "Matzah" as the essence that we must return to, must re-discover in order to grow in purity and awareness toward our liberation. The "hametz" is the sourness, often unconscious, the residue from suffering, disappointment. When *hametz* is left to its own, it causes inflation, which is the process whereby layers of false-self build up to protect the essential core. The trouble is that through this process we also lose access to that essence. Before Pesach the challenge it seems to me is to release those layers of false self and then to discern the sourness that gave rise to that layering, then to re-experience the essence which is the unique spark at your core, beyond all the accumulated knowledge, talent, personality that you usually identify with. (Rabbi Shefa Gold)

Yet another reason [that we clear out *hametz*] is explained by Rabbi Israel HaMagid of Kotznitz, the 18th century Hasidic commentator Avodat Israel. He says: 'Checking for *hametz* reminds us to remove the tendency towards evil that dwells in each and every individual. For it is not the way of men and women to check their own deeds so carefully, but (to) look at the deeds of others and find faults.' It is indeed way too easy to think about others' faults and make judgments than it is to examine our own ways. Rather than work on improving ourselves, we often look at others and convince ourselves that others are at fault, others need improving, all the while ignoring self-examination and improvement. It is this *hametz* that the Avodat Israel suggests we get rid of through the checking for *hametz*. Ridding ourselves of *hametz* then is ridding us of that part of ourselves that tends towards evil and judgment of others. The removal of the *hametz* becomes a removal of our own arrogance... inviting us to focus on **our** space not someone else's, and hopefully, to check **our** own deeds so that ultimately we can repair them. (Rabbi Cheryl Peretz)

Embracing wonder & hope

The word "*matzah*" and its meaning point to the renewal of the world...The word "*hametz*" means what it does in the expressions, "One does not allow the judgment to leaven" or "One does not allow the *mitzvot* to leaven," which means one doesn't wait. Thus, *hametz* means something old while *matzah* means the opposite, something renewed. Our Creator is teaching us through the mitzvah of *matzah* that there is One Who renews the world. Each day and each moment does this One consciously renew the world, as was done at the going-out from Mitzrayim where wonders which transcended nature occurred, since all the ten plagues were outside the normal course of nature. And when we know this clearly, then

we will not move our arms and legs to do anything other than that which honors the blessed and exalted Name... (cont'd)

This is why the sages taught “the last taste of the seder must be that of *matzah*” (Talmud, *Pesahim* 119b). This was so that the taste would remain, the sense of serving God out of awareness of miracles and wonders. This tells us that this form of devotion is sustained forever. That is why we continue with this form of religious practice, so that this service of God will not budge from our mouth, and the mouths of our descendants. (*Kedushat Levi*, Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev, 18th c.)

Pesah is, then, a time of renewal and of hope. It is a time to recall our connection – through creation – with all of God’s creatures. And the matzah blends this into one single symbol: again to quote Philo: “Unleavened food is also imperfect or unripe, as a memorial of the good hope which is entertained; since nature is by this time preparing her annual gifts for the race of humanity, with an abundance and bounty pouring forth.” In other words, it is *davka* because the matzah is imperfect, because it is unprepared and unripe, that it is the perfect way to symbolize hope. Hope is always a potential, always unformed, always just ahead. Our anticipation of a better tomorrow – for ourselves, for our people, for the world – finds a visual reminder in this simple, hard bread. (Rabbi Bradley Artson)

Open and Closed

Think about the words chametz and matzah: $\text{חמץ} \sim \text{מצה}$.

If you look carefully at the Hebrew words there is only a small difference between the letters. That is: the small open space in the *hey* on matzah; versus the closed space in that location on the *chet* of chametz.

So what is the difference between chametz and matzah; between the breadcrumbs we cast out at Tashlich and that we burn before Pesah, and the matzah that we eat? In one sense, we can say it’s only the difference between being open and being closed. What else can we say? (Gail Dorph)

The Nullification of Hametz

(The following is recited before the *hametz* is burned, the morning of erev Passover:)

May all leaven and leavened products that exist in my property that I have seen and have not seen, that I have destroyed and have not destroyed, be considered nullified and ownerless, like the dust of the earth.

Rabbi Baruch of Mezhibuz would interpret the statement nullifying the *hametz* as follows:

All leaven—all selfish tendencies

that exists in my property—surely, they exist within my soul

that I have seen and have not seen—I think I have seen them, but, in truth, I have not seen them

that I have destroyed and have not destroyed—I think I have destroyed them, but in truth I have not destroyed them

may they be considered nullified—may You, God, nullify them and destroy them.

(in *The Chassidic Haggadah*, translated by Rabbi Eliyahu Touger)

Pesach Practices

1) Clearing out *hametz*: In many ways, the most important part of Passover is in the preparation. There are multiple ways to clear out the ‘hametz’ in our lives. One is the traditional way: to remove all products made with the five prohibited grains (wheat, barley, spelt, oats, and rye – and in Ashkenazi tradition, also legumes, corn and rice), and to thoroughly clean one’s kitchen and indeed the entire house. The removal of *hametz* can take many forms; even removing the obvious non-Pesach-dik products like bread, cereal, cookies, etc., can be a meaningful practice. As you remove these products and give your kitchen a thorough cleaning, stop every 10 minutes and say, *lichvod Pesach*, “in honor of Passover,” to remind yourself of why you are doing this. As you pause in your physical cleaning, you may want to also set an intention of other types of internal *hametz* that you’d like to release—habits or defenses you no longer need to cling to, negative mind-states that obstruct your freedom. The night before Passover begins, do the ritual burning of some small pieces of *hametz*. As it burns, imagine yourself throwing into the fire those bits of internal *hametz* that you are ready to release.

This can also be a time to clear out non-food *hametz*, other types of things that clutter up your life: piles of old papers; emails clogging your in-box; general physical mess. Set an intention to simplify your life and gain greater clarity, and take on one physical project that will help manifest that intention.

2) Asking Questions: In preparation for the Seder, set aside a time to reflect on questions that you need to ask yourself. What are the ways that I feel enslaved in my life? How do I obstruct my own freedom? Are there mental habits, assumptions, places of fear, that hold me back? One way to surface these questions is to find a place to sit quietly, focusing on the breath and allowing the mind to settle. Without thinking about it, let a question float in to your mind. Possible questions: “How might this year be different than last year?” “What is true for me in this moment?” “What is the question I need to ask?” Sit with any one of these (or your own version), letting the awareness follow your breath, and see what arises. Another approach is to choose a question, and do some free writing in response – set a timer for 5 or 10 minutes, and just write, without stopping.

3) Cultivating Hope: On Passover, we clear out the old in order to make room for the new. In doing so, we are embracing the possibility for change, for liberation, for leaving behind our personal *Mitzrayim* and taking the first steps towards a new, freer place. As Kedushat Levi teaches, Passover is a reminder that Creation is an ongoing process, and that we ourselves are ongoing processes. Our capacity for change—individually, collectively—is a kind of “miracle” that we need to celebrate and affirm. Either during the Seder or during the week of Passover, say aloud – or write down – your hopes for yourself and your life. Set aside a time for reflection, quiet meditation, during which you can visualize yourself as you hope yourself to be. See if you can dig beneath the levels of accumulated “false self” that Shefa Gold describes, and find the inner “matzah,” the purity at your core, the true self. If judgments of other people in your life arise, realize that these thoughts are intended to show you places in yourself that you need to attend to. Shift your awareness back to yourself, and bring compassion to those aspects of yourself that cause you pain or sadness. You can use phrases from the haggadah to cultivate this sense of possibility: *avadim hayinu, atah bnei chorin*—“we were slaves, now we are free”; or *l’shanah ha-ba’ah b’Yerushalayim*—“next year in Jerusalem—the place of wholeness and peace.”