

# A Speck of Flour

Based on the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe  
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It is rare to find a substance so utterly proscribed by the Torah. There are other foods whose consumption is forbidden; but this the Torah forbids us to eat, benefit from in any way, or even keep in our possession. Usually, a forbidden substance becomes nullified if it mixes with a much greater quantity of permissible substances; of this, the Torah forbids the slightest trace—even if it blends with something a million times its volume, the entire lot becomes unfit for consumption.

We are speaking, of course, of *chametz*, or leaven, on Passover. In the weeks before the festival, the Jewish home is the scene of an all-out war of extermination. Floorboards are scraped, furniture dismantled, countertops boiled. On the night before the festival we conduct a solemn search for any survivors, and consign them to the flames on the next morning. The enemy: the most minute breadcrumb, beer stain or pasta residue—anything in which grain and water have come together and fermented, rendering the product chametz and utterly intolerable for eight days a year.

On the spiritual level, leaven, whose primary feature is that it rises and inflates itself, embodies pride. This explains our uncompromising rejection of *chametz*. Other negative traits might be tolerable, or even useful, in small, greatly diluted doses. Depression, for example, has been declared a grave sin, for man is commanded to serve G-d with joy; but a small dash of melancholy, counterbalanced by a hundredfold helping of joy, may serve a positive function, reflecting a necessary concern over one's shortcomings and the commitment to rectify them. The same applies to anger, stubbornness, chutzpah, and a host of other negative character traits: as a rule, they are undesirable, yet in the proper context and in the right proportions, each has its positive applications. Arrogance and pride, however, are of such spiritual toxicity (the Talmud states that G-d says of the arrogant one, "I and he cannot dwell in the same world") that we must forgo any attempt to exploit them, and must totally eradicate them from every crevice of our hearts.

## The 49-Day Difference

And yet, despite the severity of the prohibition of *chametz*, it is forbidden for only eight days and several hours a year (from mid-morning of the day before Passover, until nightfall of the eighth day), while other, less toxic elements are forbidden year-round. In other words, there is a state of being, which Passover represents, in



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which arrogance and pride are objectionable in any context and quantity. After Passover, however, *chametz* becomes permissible, and even desirable.

This duality is also expressed in the laws governing the offerings brought to G-d in the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. In the Holy Temple, it was Passover all year round: all grain offerings had to be unleavened, in keeping with the divine command (Leviticus 2:11), “No leaven . . . may be brought as a fire-offering to G-d.” This, too, reflects G-d’s utter abhorrence of arrogance and pride. Nevertheless, on the festival of Shavuot, two loaves of bread, specifically commanded to be “baked leavened” (ibid. 23:17), were offered in the Temple.

In other words, Passover and Shavuot represent two extremes in the desirability of pride. On Passover *chametz* is wholly and utterly forbidden, while on Shavuot it is not only permitted but is a mitzvah, commanded and desired by G-d.

Passover marks our birth as a people, when G-d extracted a clan of slaves from the 49 gates of the depravity of Egypt and set them on the journey toward Sinai, where He took Israel as His eternal bride on Shavuot. Connecting Passover and Shavuot is the 49-day Counting of the Omer: the Torah commands that beginning on the eve of the second day of Passover, we should conduct a daily count of the days that have passed from the day after the Exodus.

The Kabbalists explain that the human personality consists of seven basic attributes (*chessed, gevurah, tif'eret, netzach, hod, yesod* and *malchut*, or love, restraint, harmony, ambition, devotion, connection and receptiveness), reflecting the seven divine attributes (*sefirot*) which G-d invested in His creation. Each *sefirah* contains elements of all seven, making for a total of 49 divine channels of relation to our reality, and 49 corresponding traits in the human heart. Thus, the Kabbalists speak of the utterly corrupt society of Egypt as a moral nadir of 49 “gates of depravity.” These are paralleled by 49 “gates of understanding”—the ladder and process by which one achieves the refinement and perfection of all elements in one’s character.

Therein lies the significance of the 49-day count and climb from Passover to Shavuot. On the first day of Passover, we were physically removed from the land of Egypt; yet we still had to remove the Egypt from within us, to cleanse our hearts and minds of the residue of two centuries of pagan environment and practice. So on the second day of Passover begins a 49-day count, chronicling a daily internal exodus from another of Egypt’s gates of depravity and an entry into another of the gates of understanding. After forty-nine days, we attain the internal purity required to receive the divine election and communication of Shavuot.

Hence the difference between Passover and Shavuot regarding *chametz*. One who is still burdened with negative drives and emotions (though he has already come out of Egypt in the most literal sense by abandoning the negative behavior they engender) lacks the ability to sublimate the most potent and corruptible of the heart’s traits—pride. So immediately following the Exodus, *chametz* is banned. It is only upon attaining the full refinement of all forty-nine compartments of the heart on Shavuot that the offering of leaven to G-d becomes a mitzvah, appropriate and desirable.

On this level, pride is no longer the self-inflating *chametz* of the Passover personality, but the selfless pride of one who has cleansed his heart of every last vestige of self-interest and has dedicated it exclusively to the

service of his Creator. This is a pride not in what one is or has achieved, but an expression of the majesty of He whom he serves and whose reality he conveys in his every thought, word and deed.

## Wet Matzah

This also explains an interesting law regarding Acharon Shel Pesach, the eighth and final day of Passover.

One example of the extremes to which we go to avoid the slightest trace and chance of *chametz* on Passover is the practice, in many communities, of refraining from eating *matzah sheruyah* (soaked matzah) on the festival.

Matzah is made of water and flour that have been speedily and thoroughly blended and baked, to avoid any chance of leavening. Once baked, the flour in the matzah will not leaven; matzah (or matzah meal made by grinding matzah to a fine flour) may now conceivably be mixed with water and other liquids in the preparation of food for the festival. However, there remains an extremely slight chance that some of the flour might have failed to mix completely with the water at the time of the matzah's original baking, leaving a few particles of raw flour at risk of leavening should they come in contact with water.

For this reason, many halachic authorities, including Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, rule that it is best to avoid the use of *matzah sheruyah* on Passover. This ruling has been accepted by many communities, to the extent that there are those who are careful not to even place matzah on the table during mealtimes unless it is securely covered, lest a single drop of water alight on a piece of matzah. This is one of the many examples of the unparalleled lengths to which we go in the avoidance of *chametz* on Passover.

On the other hand, Rabbi Schneur Zalman permits the use of *matzah sheruyah* on the eighth day of Passover. Furthermore, his successors, the rebbes of Chabad, made a point of wetting matzah at every course of the meals of Acharon Shel Pesach.

There are those who are wont to explain this leniency by the fact that the eighth day of Passover is a rabbinical institution, as opposed to the first seven days, which are biblically ordained. But the observance of the rabbinically added days to the festivals is just as binding for the Jew as their biblical sisters; in fact, *halachah* is even more stringent regarding certain aspects of their observance, for the very reason of forestalling any inclination to treat them lightly. Indeed, with the exception of the eating of soaked matzah, we are no less diligent in our rejection of leaven on Passover's final day. Why, then, this exception?

## A Taste of Future

As we have discussed, the 49-day count from Passover to Shavuot represents the process of refining the seven basic attributes of the heart as each comprises elements of all seven, making for a total of 49 traits. This is why the Torah speaks of the count as consisting of weeks ("Seven weeks you shall count for yourselves . . ."—Deuteronomy 16:9). In our daily count, we too emphasize its weeks: on the twenty-fifth day, for example, we say, "Today is twenty-five days, which are three weeks and four days to the Omer [count]." Indeed, Shavuot—the name of the festival that culminates the Counting of the Omer—means "weeks." For the

internal count also consists of seven weeks, being the refinement of the seven attributes of the heart that are each a unit of seven.

Thus, each week of the count is a microcosmic “Omer Count” of its own, involving seven days or sub-traits as they are reflected in the various nuances of that week’s attribute.

The eighth day of Passover is the seventh day of the count, and the final day of its first week. It therefore represents the point at which elements of each of the seven attributes (as they are present within the attribute of chessed, “love”) have been refined and elevated. The eighth of Passover is thus a mini-Shavuot, and shares its leaven-tolerant quality. While outright *chametz* is still strictly forbidden, we mark this milestone on the road to perfection with the positive use of a *chametz*-vulnerable element, employing wetted matzah to enhance our festival meal.

This corresponds to another feature of the eighth day of Passover—its identification with the era of Moshiach. The *haftorah* (reading from the Prophets) for this day ([Isaiah 10:32–12:6](#)) describes the coming of Moshiach and the harmonious perfection of a time when “the world shall be filled with the knowledge of G-d as the waters cover the sea.” Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov instituted a special meal, the Feast of Moshiach, to be held on the afternoon of eighth day of Passover, as a time that is profoundly suited to taste and experience the divinely perfect world we are creating with our positive efforts—a world in which the spirit of impurity shall cease from the earth, and everything, including the pride so abhorrent to G-d today, shall be sublimated as a wholly positive and altruistic force.

Therein lies the lesson of the eighth day of Passover: even if perfection seems a far-off goal, you possess the ability to create a taste of perfection in the here and now. Start with a single trait of your personality, with a small corner of your community. If you wholly devote yourself to it, you will find in it elements of your entire self, indeed of the entire universe. Your creation of this small model of perfection will serve as the catalyst for its realization on a holistic, and ultimately universal, level.

*Based on the Lubavitcher Rebbe’s talks on the eighth day of Passover in the years 1967 and 1977, and on other occasions (Likkutei Sichot, vol. 22, pp. 30–38).*

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Based on the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson; adapted by Yanki Tauber.

Originally published in *Week in Review*.

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