

Parashat Tzav – Shabbat Hagadol 5777, 2017:

The Mussar of Chametz

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yecheiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, Shayna Yehudit bat Avraham Manes and Rivka, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

According to the Rambam's list of *Taryag Mitzvot* (613 Commandments) found in his *Sefer HaMitzvot*, there are four distinct commandments that focus upon the prohibition of *chametz* (leavened bread or its derivatives). The first two discuss the Torah's ban on the ownership of *chametz* during Passover:

The 200th prohibition is that we are forbidden to have *chametz seen* (*lo yay'ra'eh*) in our dwellings all seven days [of *Pesach*]. The source of this commandment is G-d's statement, "None of your *chametz* may be seen, and none of your *s'or* (that which facilitates leavening) may be seen in all your territories." *Sefer Shemot* 13:7, all translations, Rabbi Berel Bell)

The 201st prohibition is that we are forbidden to have *chametz found* (*lo yimatze*) in our dwellings, even if it is not visible, or if it is left as a deposit. The source of this commandment is the Torah's statement "For seven days, no *chametz* may be found in your homes." *Sefer Shemot* 12:19)

The second set of *mitzvot* referring to *chametz*, as discussed in the *Sefer HaMitzvot*, emphasizes the proscription of eating this forbidden substance, and the positive commandment to remove it from our homes and storage places:

The 199th prohibition is that we are forbidden to eat *chametz* on the 14th [of *Nissan*] after noon. The source of this commandment is G-d's statement, "Do not eat any *chametz* with it [the *korban Pesach*]." (*Sefer Devarim* 16:3)

The 156th *mitzvah* is that we are commanded to remove *chametz* [leaven] from our possession on the 14th of *Nissan*. This is the *mitzvah* of “removing the leaven.” The source of this commandment is G-d’s statement (exalted be He), “On the day before [Pesach] you must remove the leaven from your homes.” (*Sefer Shemot* 12:15)

Upon due reflection, one is struck by the multiple *mitzvot* associated with the *issur* (prohibition) of *chametz*. This is not the case in regard to many other *issurim* that the Torah enjoins. By way of illustration, the injunction against wearing a garment comprised of linen and wool threads (*sha’atnez*) is found but twice (*Sefer Vayikra* 19:19 and *Sefer Devarim* 22:11) – yet, it is the self-same forbidden act, rather than two distinct commandments. Why, then, does the Torah place such pronounced emphasis upon the prohibition of *chametz*?

One early source that informs our question is the *Talmud Yerushalmi*:

Rabbi Tanchum bar Isbalustika prayed in the following manner: “May it be Your will before You Hashem my G-d and the G-d of my fathers, that You destroy and remove the yoke of the evil inclination (*yetzer hara*) from our hearts. For You have created us to perform Your will, and we are obligated to perform Your will, You desire this, and we desire this. Who [i.e. what], however, prevents us from [doing so?] – the leavening agent in the dough (*s’or she’b’isah*)... (*Berachot* 4:2, translation and brackets my own)

The *Talmud Yerushalmi* clearly identifies the *yetzer hara* with the *s’or she’b’isah* – i.e. *chametz*. This conceptual nexus is even more explicit in a prayer found in Rav Amram Gaon’s (810-875) celebrated work, “*Seder Rav Amram Gaon*:”

Master of the Cosmos, it is revealed and well-known before You that I desire to perform your will – yet, the *s’or she’b’isah* is preventing me from doing so. May it be Your will before You Hashem, my G-d, that You will destroy, bring low and distance the *yetzer hara* from before me; and may You bring it low, humble it and distance it from the 148 limbs that are within me; moreover, may it not trip me and force me away from your good paths. Instead, place the *yetzer tov* (good inclination) within my heart, along with a good “friend” to keep Your precepts, to serve You and to perform Your will in a whole-hearted manner. (*Nefilat Apayim v’Kedushah d’Sidra*, translation my own)

Rabbeinu Bachya ben Asher (1255-1340) builds upon our earlier cited sources and takes them to a new level of understanding. In his estimation, the prohibition of *chametz* “incorporates all of the commandments.” (*Sefer Kad HaKemach, Pesach I*, this and the following translations and additions my own) This notion is crucial, since:

...*chametz* metaphorically represents the *yetzer hara*. As such, we have the allusion of the idea that just as the Torah obligates us to nullify the *chametz* in our hearts, so, too, we are duty-bound to expunge the *yetzer hara* from our hearts (*min halev*) – in order that it should not rule over us. This is what the Torah intimates when it commands us, “remove it [i.e. the *chametz*]” (“*tashbitu*”). [Little wonder] our Sages of blessed memory declared that *tashbitu* was [accomplished, even] *b’lev* (i.e. through a cognitive gesture).

At this juncture, Rabbeinu Bachya presents us with an intellectual *tour de force* regarding the underlying spiritual and ethical meaning of *chametz*. In so doing, he answers our original question, “Why, does the Torah place such pronounced emphasis upon the prohibition of *chametz*?”

And just as Rabbinic tradition teaches us that we must [physically] remove the *chametz*, and we must check our home in all of its crevices and cracks [to see if we can discover it], so, too, are we obligated to diligently search and check in the innermost portion of our being...and in our thoughts for all manner of evil opinions. Moreover, just like the search for *chametz* may neither be conducted by the light of the sun, nor by the light of the moon – nor by a torch, but rather only by a candle, so, too, the search for the *yetzer hara* must only be done with the light of the soul. As we find in the text, “Man’s soul is Hashem’s light, which searches out the depths of his being.” (*Sefer Mishle 20:27*)

May we be *zocheh* (merit) this *Pesach* to have souls that serve as Hashem’s light, so that we may search for, and remove, the *chametz* that may reside in the innermost recesses of our being. If we can accomplish this lofty goal, hopefully this will be our final *Pesach* in *galut* (Exile). “Next in year in Jerusalem!” *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom and *Chag Kasher v’Sameach*

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The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

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*** I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.