



## Chometz: Moving Beyond Self Rebbetzin Tziporah Heller

What is *chometz* in essence? Why is it prohibited?

*Chometz* is a natural phenomenon that happens through a process of oxidation. When hot air bubbles enter a flour and water mixture, they make the dough rise. Hot air evokes the image of an inflated sense of self. On a deeper level Rabbeinu Bachya speaks about *chometz* as a symbol of *midat hadin* (the attribute of justice). Before creation, only Hashem existed. As soon as the process of creation began, there was the Creator and creation. The more bloated creation makes itself, the more it conceals its actual source, Hashem. The Egyptians were a haughty, hierarchical, society. It was an environment in which the I was epitomized by Pharaoh himself, who put himself above human frailty. The Egyptians didn't see Pharaoh as worthy of sovereignty by permission of some other force. They saw him as the force itself.

Let us trace back to the sin of the *eitz hadat*. Hashem created the world for a purpose and He is committed to see it through. Adam's mistake in eating the fruit had to do with thinking that being separate from Hashem would make his search for Him more meaningful. Although there was some truth to it, it was antithetical to the command he was given. Thus, he failed. Although Hashem gave the generations after Adam a chance to rectify Adam's misstep, they too failed. The generation of the Flood was destroyed as a result of their selfish exploitative lifestyle. The generation of the Tower of Bavel fell due to their inflated ego that drove them to conquer the heavens. Further generations failed, wanting to see themselves as the ultimate Being. In Egypt, Hashem knocked the Egyptians flat. After experiencing the ten plagues they were completely deflated. Hashem's severity of justice was not only meant to bring mankind to a state of rectification, it taught them humility.

The words *chometz* and *matzah* are almost the same. *Chometz* has a *chet* and *matzah* has a *heh*. It's only the little *nekuda* of self that turns *matzah* into *chometz*. The urge to be

self-serving corrupts one's thoughts and actions. If you see yourself made bigger through a *mitzvah*, then it's attractive. If you see the self being limited because of the good deed, which often happens to make room for Hashem, then it's less alluring. *Chesed* and big name *tzedakah* are popular. Honesty in business is less desirable. We see a lot of that sort of *chometz* today where people ask, "Am I in it or not?" What attracts a girl with a serious Jewish education to a non-*tzniut* outfit? She'll say, "This expresses me and I want to be me." And it's true. The basic message of such an outfit is, "I am," while the message Hashem wants us to have is, "Hashem is."

The Abarbanel views *chometz* as the cause of *taavah* (desire). It all boils down to affirming self, taking in as opposed to giving out, exploiting as opposed to connecting. We left Egypt so quickly that there was no time for the bread to rise. Why didn't we leave a little earlier? Or why didn't Hashem tell us to take fruits and vegetables instead of bread? The Ramchal explains that the Jews in Egypt were becoming a people. They needed to learn to separate from the non-Jewish world. The Gra says that we have enormous spiritual power. This differentiates us from other peoples. We can uplift materialism, but to do so we have to submit to Hashem. Because of this, the prohibition of *chometz* was specifically given at the birth of the Jewish nation.

It is interesting to note that the offering made on Shavuot, the *shte'i halechem*, had to be *chometz*. If we've separated ourselves and know our unique destiny, then there's no need to be afraid of the physical world. Torah gives us the means to elevate it.

The Zohar refers to *Matzah* as the bread of faith. Faith means recognizing that everything comes from Hashem, that He is compassionate, and that all that He does is for our good. The *matzah* is called *lechem oni*, bread of suffering, yet it also symbolizes Hashem's love. He took us out of Egypt in a hurry even though we weren't worthy. *Matzah* teaches us that His mercy and His justice all come from one source. Hashem relates to us in terms of

what we need at the moment. The Midrash says the *matzah* tasted like *mohn*. The *mohn* tasted like whatever the person had to experience. *Matzah* is also related to seeing everything as reflective of Hashem's will. *Matzah* takes us to humility, faith, and fear of Hashem. *Chometz* brings us to the opposite end. *Matzah* is *yirat shamayim*. It's seeing Hashem instead of ourselves, His control instead of our own.

The Maharal notes a difference between self-esteem and *gaavah* (arrogance). The voice of self-esteem says, "Hashem has given me strengths and I will use them and take pleasure in them." This inspires people to accomplish great things. *Gaavah* says, "I am superior to Hashem and man. I'm autonomous." *Gaavah* has to be destroyed by burning, by completely eradicating egocentricity and thoughts of self.

Before Pesach we must engage in a quest of outer and inner cleaning. What happens if someone brings a crumb into my spotless kitchen? Will I scream at him? Will I kill him? Is that selfless? What if someone has a different idea of what should be cleaned first or second? Will I negate him? Will I be so self-absorbed in my cleaning that I won't prepare food for my family? A person has to enter the period before Pesach with some firm decisions. No anger, because anger and *gaavah* are twins. No creating bad setups. When we're tired and hungry we slip back into bad *middot*. Brief escapes such as food, sleep, and music help. Make the preparations joyous and fun by getting everyone to work together towards a common goal.

How did the Jews merit to leave Egypt? They had to do a *brit milah* and bring the *korban Pesach*. They displayed incredible *mesirut nefesh*. Today we are called upon to offer up our inner selves. May the merit of ridding ourselves of our internal *chometz* lead to the *geulah sheleima* speedily in our days.