

Spring Cleaning: Inside & Out
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Congregation Beth Torah

It's always around this time of year that I think of the great Carol Channing and her magnificent performance on the soundtrack that I grew up listening to—the music of *Free to Be You and Me*. You must remember her monologue—it's more of a monologue than a song—entitled “Housework.” She reminds us that:

“The lady we see when we're watching TV

The lady who smiles as she scours or scrubs or rubs or washes or wipes or mops or dusts or cleans or whatever she does on our TV screens...

That lady is smiling *because she's an actress and she's earning money* for learning those speeches that mention those wonderful soaps and detergents and cleansers and cleaners and powders and pastes and waxes and bleaches...” After all, nobody likes housework!

How many of us are really smiling as we go into this final stretch of Passover scouring and scrubbing and rubbing and washing and wiping and moping and dusting and cleaning? My guess is not many of you. This week of Passover preparation may be the most labor intensive week of the Jewish year! In fact, as I am knee deep in the grime of a year's worth of oven grease, or the juice that spilled months ago in the back of the refrigerator, I feel that I am indeed fulfilling the commandment *chayav adam lir'ot et atzmo ke-ilu hu yatza mi-mitzrayim*—That I have some sense of what slavery must have been like in a very personal way. I don't know if Carol Channing would accept that revisionist-take on housework, but it works for me during the week prior to Pesach.

And when it's all over, we take not a dust buster or flashlight in hand, but a feather, spoon and candle to search out the crevices and dark places of our homes to make sure that no more of that pernicious *chametz*—that's leaven—continues to reside in our midst.

The preoccupation with chametz didn't begin with Passover. In fact if you read closely the words of our parasha this morning you may have discovered that chametz was not

allowed on the altar of the tabernacle—EVER—not only on Passover, but all 365 days of the year. *Kol mincha asher takrivu Ladonai lo ta'aseh chametz...*In Lev. 2:11 the Torah explicitly states that NO meal offering that you offer to the Lord shall be made with leaven.” Next week’s parasha will reiterate the same information. I suppose that’s one way of totally avoiding Passover cleaning! But it seems to me that the Torah has other ideas...But before we attempt to understand why the Torah so concerned about chametz, not only on Passover, but all year round, let’s take a moment to consider another question.

My childhood memories of the Passover seder all revolve around the Four Questions. For a long time I was the youngest grandchild, so this was my moment to shine! It was during that glorious moment in the seder that everyone stopped their round table reading of the Haggadah, my nana stopped rushing back and forth from the kitchen, all the adult side conversations were silenced, and the spotlight was on me...as in my best childhood voice I belted out what my papa calls the *feir kashes*. Think with me about that first question.

*Mah nishtanah ha'layla hazeh mikol ha'leilot. She'bechol haleilot anu ochlin **chametz u'matzah**. Ha'layla hazeh kulo matzah.*

The difference according to the haggadah between P. night and all other nights is that on all other nights we eat chametz and matzah, but on this night only matzah. Now I don't know about you, but my digestive system only begrudgingly allows me to eat matzah during the 8 days of Passover, and that's about it. I know that some of you like matzah with a schmear of cream cheese with your coffee on Sunday mornings, but still most people reserve their major matzah consumption for 8 days a year. Our ancestors, however, ate bread or chametz much less often than we do. For them eating unleavened bread was the norm, as leavened bread was a scarce commodity. The production of bread may only have been perfected around the 3rd century BCE.

More than that, there was a pervasively negative attitude about leavened bread in the ancient world. The 1st century Greek essayist Plutarch records that the Roman High Priest was forbidden to even touch leaven, not to mention consume it. The Christian Bible associates leaven with malice and wickedness. And the eminent Hebrew Bible scholar Jacob Milgrom suggests that chametz was for the ancient world the arch-symbol of fermentation, deterioration, and death—and therefore, it was forbidden in the precincts of the tabernacle.

When you think about it, yeast is a strange substance—the word yeast comes from the Sanskrit word meaning to seethe or boil. In the baking of bread, yeast, which is a fungus, actually feeds on the sugars in the dough, and as it does carbon dioxide gas and alcohol are released, which is what causes the bread to rise. It also causes a certain, unpleasant odor as well. The rabbis were quick to seize upon the symbolism both of fermentation and odor represented in leavened bread. Consider, for example the meditation of the third century sage Rabbi Alexandri, who would add these words to the conclusion of his daily prayers:

Master of the Universe—*Ribon Ha'olamim*

It is revealed and known before you—*galui v'yadua lifanecha*

That our will is to do Your will—*she'retzoneinu retzon'cha*

And what (literally: who) prevents us from doing Your will? *U'mi me'akev?*

The yeast in the dough—*Se'or sh'ba'isa!*

Rashi explains that yeast is a euphemism for our *yetzer ha'ra*—our inclination to do evil—an inclination that resides and occasionally bubbles and puffs up inside each one of us. And so our Sages suggest, that as we scour and scrub and rub and wash and wipe and mop and dust and clean our homes, cars and offices in this week before Passover—we also have to look for the chametz, the yeast, the fermentation that is growing *inside of us* as well.

This may sound like the stuff of Yom Kippur to many of you, but I want to alert you to a certain collusion between YK and Passover. Exactly six months after the autumnal equinox ushered in YK, Passover occurs along with the spring equinox. At these two moments of the year when light and darkness are equalized we celebrate two new years—Passover the initiation of the spring agricultural cycle, and YK the ingathering of the harvest. At the conclusion of both the seder and YK we proclaim: *L'shana ha'ba-a biyrushalayim*—hoping for the end of exile and our ultimate redemption. It is also a custom to wear white at both Passover and YK—the symbol of purity and renewal.

After the gray winter months, we need the reminder to clean our inner closets once again, and to eliminate any decaying chametz we've carried around inside of us since we last cleaned it out on Yom Kippur. Passover is fundamentally about transformation and renewal. The very symbols themselves transform before your very eyes:

The matzah which at the beginning of the seder is called *lachma anya*—the bread of affliction, at the end of the seder is *Afikomen*—dessert! The *charoset*, which initially symbolizes the mortar which our ancestors used to construct pharaoh's edifices, at the end is the sweet substance that over powers the bitterness of *maror* (in your Hillel sandwich). The saltwater which represents the very tears and sweat of our oppressed ancestors is literally displaced later-on by the dunk of a hard boiled egg—symbolic of renewal, birth, and a new life. Passover is all about the optimism, hope, sweetness, life (!) overpowering bitterness, misery and sorrow.

So my prayer for you, my friends, is that as you take the candle and feather into the dark recesses of your homes—searching for chametz as you prepare for Pesach, that you take this opportunity to do an internal spring cleaning as well. Look not only at your surroundings, but also deep inside, and scour and scrub and rub and wash and wipe and mop and dust and clean away anything you want to be rid of in your life, so that Passover can truly be for you *Z'man Cheiruteinu*—a Season of Liberation and Freedom.

Shabbat Shalom.