



dedicated learning. dynamic leadership.

## **Bedikat Chametz Pesach 2020/5780 Emily Goldberg Winer**

There is a palpable excitement the night before Pesach. After cleaning and scrubbing every nook and cranny of their homes, families gather in their living rooms and prepare for *Bedikat Chametz*, the search for those final crumbs of leavened bread. In many ways this ritual marks the beginning of Pesach. We deem the bread in our homes *hefker*, or ownerless before we relive the text of the Haggadah and too see ourselves as homeless before leaving Egypt.

Bedikat Chametz, like everything else in Pesach, is a process. The Shulchan Aruch enforces clear structure to this mitzvah (Orach Chayim 432-433). One must not be too engrossed in learning beforehand, lest they forget to search for bread that night. One must not speak from the moment after reciting the bracha of the bedikah until after the search is complete. Each person in every household can be involved in searching the home.

One detail that moves me is the emphasis on the darkness. It is preferred that we conduct Bedikat Chametz at night exclusively by candlelight. The Mishnah Brurah explains that the light of the candle allows us to check for crumbs in the smallest of places: holes in the walls, cracks so narrow that only the flame of a candle could illuminate. This body of halakha rejects any other suggestion for light-- not sunlight, torches, oil, or fat. Just the flicker of a single candle.

I want to offer another suggestion to the need for a candle in this process. In the work of searching the bread of our cabinets and the leaveness of ourselves, we must become dependent on light amidst the darkness. We are required to flip off our electric light switches and rely on the dim guide of a flame, even if that means forcing ourselves to experience darkness. The flicker of the light calls us to huddle together and risk bumping into furniture and stepping on each others' toes all just to fulfill this mitzvah of searching for crusts of bread. But for a brief moment as our eyes adjust to the darkness and our pupils enlarge to match, we experience the vulnerability of loneliness. The candle becomes the source of our familiarity and we tighten our grips around the warm wax to ensure that between the structure of the searching and the chaos of the dark, God is indeed there.

Bedikat Chametz requires us to search even deeper than the crevices of our living room walls. In the same darkness we must search the depths of ourselves, looking for the parts of our egos to flatten like the very matzot we will devour the next evening. Rabbeinu Bachya ben Asher in his *Kad HaKemach* work of musar explores the role of bedikah as it relates to our own hearts.

וכיון שהחמץ יש בו רמז ליצה"ר מכאן יש לנו רמז שכשם שאנו מצווים לבטל החמץ בלב מן התורה כך אנו חייבים לבטל יצה"ר מהלב ושלא ימשול בנו וזש"ה תשביתו

There's a kabbalistic hint to the *yetzer ha'ra* (evil inclination): just as we eradicate chametz and check (livdok) the house in nooks and in cracks, so too we are obligated to search and check the chambers of our inner being for negative intentions and harmful thoughts.

He teaches that our own neshamas exist as the single candles through which we search the parts of ourselves that we want to elevate. He quotes Proverbs 20:27

“The soul of a person is the candle of God, looking for all of      :נר יִקְוֶה וְנִשְׁמַת אָדָם חֹפֵׁשׁ כְּלֵי-חַדְרֵי-בֶטֶן:  
 his most inner parts.”

We cling to the strict halachot of Pesach, attempting to “out-frum” ourselves from the rest of the year. For some, it may be comforting to check hekshers on aluminum foil and repeatedly rearrange every cabinet, just as our bubbies did. Stressing over each of the intricacies of the preparation, however, may lead us to the essence of *mitzrayim*, the very narrowness from which we celebrate our exodus as a people. While the restrictions of this holiday can cause obsessive behavior, we should actually be cultivating this sense of dependency that Pesach gives us the opportunity to feel. Dependency on the structure of the seder. Dependency on the traditions that span generations. Dependency on the same songs, foods, and smells year after year. Our Pesach tables invite us to feel attached to our past and cling to its timeless rituals and narratives.

Reb Mimi Feigelson teaches that as soon as Eve ate from the tree of knowledge she realized with trepidation that she would be alone in facing the consequences of her sin. At that moment, when looking at Eve, Adam decided that he, too, would eat from the tree. Dependency is often associated with weakness, but this picture of Adam and Eve models such strength. We are our strongest, bravest, and brightest when we mutually rely on each other--so much so that we would be willing to make them feel less alone even in the darkest of times.

During Maggid we encounter the famous discussion between R' Elazar ben Azariah and Ben Zoma in which they analyze when to remember the Exodus from Egypt. They suggest that remembering this on “the days of your life” encompasses the day, but “all the days of your life” includes both the days and nights. The Zohar teaches that the night of yetziat mitzrayim was as bright as a day in the month of Tammuz. For Bnei Israel, experiencing redemption was as miraculous as the night itself becoming as light and as clear as day. For us, the fullness of our nights depends on how much we depend on that which makes us feel whole and free rather than restricted and limited.

In our brief but powerful bedikat chametz ritual, it is not the darkness itself that increases the importance of the mitzvah; it is training our eyes and hearts to depend on the candle to guide our search. The reliance on hope at its most raw is when we cling to the faint flicker of our candle the night before Pesach. It continues the next evening as we relive the darkness of slavery and the clinging onto God’s outstretched arm as we depart the narrowness of Egypt. May our grips tighten this Pesach as our eyes seek that dim hope during dark times.



*Emily Goldberg Winer graduated Magna Cum Laude from Muhlenberg College where she studied Religion and Jewish Studies. She worked with the Institute for Jewish-Christian Understanding, compiling post-biblical resources for the Jewish Annotated New Testament (Oxford, 2011). Committed to interfaith dialogue and pluralism, Emily is constantly exploring the traditions and stories of others. She has learned with the Bronfman Youth Fellowship, Drisha, the Shalom Hartman Institute, Tanenbaum, and Auburn Seminary. Emily is passionate about supporting the aging population, as well as incarcerated people. Emily lives in Riverdale with her husband Jonah, a rabbinical student at Chovevei Torah.*