

Pesach

The Symbolism of Chametz

Gloria Nusbacher

A major aspect of our preparation for Pesach is cleaning to eliminate all traces of chametz from our homes. On Pesach not only are we forbidden to eat chametz, we are also forbidden to benefit from it or to have it in our possession (Shmot 13:7). Yet chametz is not inherently “evil”—we are free to eat it after Pesach. Moreover, on Shavuot—which the Torah directly connects to Pesach through the required counting of days for seven weeks—there was a commandment to bring a korban expressly made of leavened bread(chametz) (Vayikra 23:17).

According to Rav Ezra Bick, a Ram at Yeshivat Har Etzion, the Torah’s linking of Pesach and Shavuot through the counting of the omer clearly indicates that Pesach starts a process that culminates in Shavuot:

“Pesach, the holiday of freedom, is directed toward the goal of Shavuot, the day of the giving of the Torah. Freedom is the necessary prerequisite for responsibility and obligation, and, conversely, is meaningless without a goal to which one is committed.”

Rav Bick sees the treatment of chametz as part of the process of moving from Pesach to Shavuot. He posits that the process of leavening represents the realization and expression of a hidden potential: “Matza is simply flour and water, baked. Bread is made of the same ingredients, but when you leave it around, unwatched and unbothered, it magically rises and grows, realizing a hidden potential and expressing it.”

According to him, by forbidding chametz on Pesach, the Torah is warning us that “[t]he raw powers of the human spirit, unguided and unchannelled, are anarchic precisely because they are powerful, precisely because they represent real growth and vitality. The first step, when granted freedom, is not to run and let all the repressed inclinations and urges fly out. Even then—ESPECIALLY THEN—one should eat matza and beware the hidden powers bursting to be free.”

Rather, we need seven weeks of counting the days toward the giving of the Torah, during which time we can begin to understand the purpose of freedom and acquire a structure to channel our potential.

Only at the end of such a period can our raw potential be transformed into creativity in service to God. Attaining such a level of development is reflected by bringing an offering of chametz.

I think there is an alternative way to see the symbol of chametz in context of the process of moving from Pesach to Shavuot. I see chametz as a symbol of pride, which the newly-freed slaves were sorely lacking. The matza they ate was indeed *lechem oni*, the bread of affliction, reflecting the mental condition of a downtrodden and demoralized people, who were likely in a state of shock at the moment of freedom. This is not a state in which it is possible to meaningfully serve God. The seven weeks between Pesach and Shavuot represent the time needed to develop the sense of pride and self-confidence that is necessary in order to receive the Torah and enter into covenant with God. The requirement of bringing a korban of chametz on Shavuot Reflects the importance of these developed traits.

However, the Torah tempers the expression of these traits by the requirement of Bikkurim (Devarim 26:1-11), which also occurs on Shavuot. Bikkurim is when a person brings first fruits to Jerusalem and acknowledges the role of God in all human success. Further cementing the connection between Pesach and Shavuot and between freedom and service to God, the declaration of Bikurim expressly refers to Yetziat Mitzrayim, and is the focal text around which the Pesach Haggadah is constructed.

This Pesach, as we re-experience the feeling of freedom, let us also remember that it is the start of our annual journey to higher levels of commitment to God and Torah.



Gloria Nusbacher earned a B.A. from Barnard College (with a double major in psychology and political science) and a J.D. from Columbia Law School. She comes to Maharat after a career of over 30 years in corporate law, including almost 20 years as a partner at one of the 100 largest U.S. law firms. Gloria has studied at Drisha, She co-founded and ran her community's women's tefillah group and has served as a board member and officer of her shul. Gloria has given shiurim in her local community, has served as an intern at Congregation Ohev Sholom, The National Synagogue in Washington, DC, and at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale. Gloria lives in West Hempstead, NY with her husband. She is the proud mother of a daughter and a proud grandmother of two boys.