

Chametz and the “Altar”ation of Our Homes

Mrs. Dena Knoll

Talmud Department Chair, Ma'ayanot Yeshiva High School for Girls

There are two “partner” *mitzvot* that lie at the heart of our celebration of Pesach: the obligation to eat *matzah* and the prohibition of eating *chametz*. Of the two, the latter is the one that dominates our preparations for the holiday. In many Jewish homes, the all-out offensive to eradicate *chametz* begins virtually the moment the last package of *mishloach manot* is delivered on Purim, a full month prior to Pesach. The enormous amount of time and energy that preparing for Pesach requires far exceeds that demanded by any other holiday.

This leads one to pose the following three questions: First, why do we have to get rid of our *chametz* at all? The Torah explicitly tells us the reason we must eat *matzah* - to commemorate the haste with which our ancestors left Egypt, leaving no time for their bread to rise.⁶ However, no reason is given anywhere in the Torah for why we cannot eat *chametz*. This begs the question: why can't we simply celebrate Pesach by eating *matzah* in addition to eating *chametz*?⁷ What is the significance of getting rid of our *chametz*?

Second, the frenzy that precedes Pesach is largely a result of a unique aspect of *chametz*: that it is *assur* not only to eat *chametz* but even to own it.⁸ Why does the prohibition extend so far as to demand our ridding *chametz* from our possession?

Third, the prohibition against *chametz* is generally associated specifically with Pesach since that is the only time of the year that it exists. However, there is actually one place where *chametz* is prohibited all year long – on the *mizbe'ach*.⁹ Thus, any explanation of the prohibition of *chametz*

A version of this article was originally published in the West Side Institutional Synagogue Haggadah, edited by Rabbi Shlomo Einhorn, 2006.

⁶ *Shmot* 12:33-34, 39 and *Devarim* 16:3

⁷ Granted our ancestors ate only *matzah* when they left Egypt. However, on Sukkot, though our ancestors in the desert did not have houses in addition to the *ananei hakavod/sukkot mamash*, it is not prohibited for us to enter our homes.

⁸ This prohibition is referred to as *בל יראה בל ימצא*, based on *Shmot* 12:19 and 13:7.

⁹ See *VaYikra* 2:11 and 6:9-10

must be able to account for why *chametz* is permitted the rest of the year everywhere except on the *mizbe'ach*.

Several interpretations of the symbolism of *chametz* have been suggested throughout the ages.¹⁰ However, it seems that the most prevalent interpretation is that *chametz* represents *avodah zarah*. In fact, the *Zohar* in 2:182 even claims that “whoever eats *chametz* on Pesach is as if he prayed to an idol.” The reason that so many commentators, going all the way back to *Chazal* and continuing through many of the *Rishonim* and *Achronim*, make a connection between these two seemingly disparate concepts is that there are many striking similarities between the *halachot* that govern them. Examples include the prohibition of even seeing or owning them; the requirement to physically destroy them and wipe out their existence, preferably through burning specifically; that both are subject to an *issur hana'ah* – it is prohibited to derive any form of benefit from them whatsoever; and the prohibition on even the tiniest particle of either of them, which is not found in any area of *halachah* other than *avodah zarah* and *chametz*.¹¹

I would like to further explore the link between *avodah zarah* and *chametz*, so as to develop a richer understanding of why we are required to rid ourselves of *chametz* every year prior to Pesach. To do so, we have to take a slight detour and explore the topic of *Korban Pesach* first.

Because we live in a post-*churban* world, we often fail to appreciate certain aspects of the *chagim* that were the focal point of the holiday in the times of the *Beit HaMikdash*. The *Korban Pesach* is a primary example. In fact, not only was the *Korban Pesach* a critical component of the *chag*, but it actually created a separate holiday of its own. It is commonly assumed that the names Pesach and *Chag HaMatzot* are two appellations used interchangeably to refer to the same holiday. However, R' Menachem Leibtag points out¹² that a careful look at the *pesukim* reveals that they are actually two separate holidays.

These are the holidays of God, holy convocations that you shall proclaim in their proper times. In the first month [Nissan] on the 14th of the month in the afternoon is Pesach for Hashem. On the 15th of this month is Chag Hamatzot for Hashem, for seven days you shall eat matzot.

Vayikra 23:4-6

אלה מועדי ה' מקראי קדש אשר תקראו
אתם במועדם: בחודש הראשון בארבעה
עשר לחודש בין הערבים פסח לה':
ובחמשה עשר יום לחודש הזה חג המצות
לה' שבעת ימים מצות תאכלו:
ויקרא כג:ד-ו

What is surprising is that the Torah is explicitly telling us that the holiday of Pesach occurs on the 14th of Nissan, the day which we consider to be merely *erev* Pesach. There is in fact a seven

¹⁰ See Rabbi Alex Israel's article, "The Symbolism of Chametz," (www.vbm-torah.org/pesach/ai-cham.htm) where he presents the following four explanations: Rabbi Alexandri in Brachot 17a seems to identify *chametz* with the *yetzer hara*. The Rambam in Moreh Nevuchim 3:46 posits that God wanted us to distance ourselves from *chametz*, especially on the *mizbe'ach*, because idolaters used to sacrifice only leavened bread. The Netziv in his Ha'amek Davar commentary to Shemot 13:3 suggests that *chametz* represents man's ability to manipulate nature, which is often positive, but has no place on the altar or when commemorating God's Divine redemption of the Jewish people in an entirely miraculous fashion. Rav Yoel bin Nun in contemporary times has suggested that *chametz* represents the completion of a process.

¹¹ See *Haggadah Sheleimah* by Rav Menachem Kasher Appendix #7, cited by Rabbi Alex Israel.

¹² In his shiur, "Pesach and Chag Ha'Matzot" (www.tanach.org/shmot/bo/bos1.htm)

day holiday that begins on the 15th of Nissan during which we must eat *matzah*, but the Torah never refers to it as Pesach; this holiday is called *Chag HaMatzot*. What emerges from these *pesukim* is that the holiday that we all refer to as Pesach is not really Pesach. Pesach, according to the Torah, is a one-day holiday celebrated on the 14th of Nissan (which we think of as *erev* Pesach) through the bringing of the *Korban Pesach*. The seven-day holiday (eight outside of Israel) that we all celebrate from the 15th through the 21st of Nissan to commemorate our Exodus from Egypt is a separate holiday called *Chag HaMatzot*.

The important point for us is that the *Korban Pesach* is so important, it actually generates a holiday of its own.¹³ In fact, Rav Michael Rosensweig notes¹⁴ that many *halachot* reflect the existence of a “*Korban Pesach* holiday” as well. For example, one of the strongest litmus tests to determine if a day possesses *mo’ed* qualities is to see if it has an *issur melacha*. Surprisingly, there is in fact a prohibition of *melacha* on the 14th of Nissan (which, again, is the day we consider *erev* Pesach).¹⁵ And the proof that this prohibition is created specifically by the bringing of the *Korban Pesach* is that the ban on *melacha* only begins at *chatzot* (midday) – the earliest time the *Korban Pesach* could be brought.¹⁶

The fact that the bringing of the *Korban Pesach* creates a *yom tov* also finds expression in the laws of mourning. As the *Rama* notes in *Yoreh De’ah* 399:3, on all *arvei yom tov* other than Pesach, a mourner who is in the midst of *shiva* continues *aveilut* until close to dusk, leaving just enough time to perform the necessary preparations for *yom tov*. However, on *erev Pesach*, all preparations become permitted at *chatzot* since that is when the *Korban Pesach* was slaughtered. The *Biur HaGra* there explains that the reason for *erev Pesach*’s unique status is that *erev Pesach* itself is considered a *mo’ed*. In fact, the *Rama* concludes that it might even be better for a mourner to take a haircut *prior* to *chatzot* since after *chatzot* it is already a holiday and prohibited to do *melacha*.

Another *halachic* manifestation of the *yom tov* created by the *Korban Pesach* relates to the prohibition of *chametz*. One would have expected the ban to begin with the advent of Pesach (as we call it; really *Chag HaMatzot*) when the sun sets at the onset of the 15th of Nissan. After all, the obligation to eat in a *sukkah* or hear the *shofar* on *Rosh HaShanah* or light Chanukah candles only takes effect once the holiday itself begins. However, when it comes to *chametz*, a strange phenomenon occurs: *Chametz* becomes *assur* on *erev* Pesach, before the holiday actually begins. Once we understand that the 14th of Nissan is a holiday itself, it makes perfect sense. And once again, it is clear that this earlier prohibition is generated specifically by the *Korban Pesach*, because it is based on *Shmot* 34:25 and *Devarim* 16:3, which say "לא תשחט על חמץ דם זבחי" and "לא תאכל עליו חמץ" – the *Korban Pesach* cannot be slaughtered or eaten while one still possesses *chametz*.¹⁷

¹³ This is evident not only from the fact that the Torah refers to the day of its sacrifice as Pesach, but also because its description is placed under the header "מועדי ה'".

¹⁴ www.torahweb.org/torah/2004/moadim/rros_pesach.html

¹⁵ *Rambam Hilchot Yom Tov* 8:17-18 and *Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim* 468:1 with the *Mishnah Berurah*.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ See פסחים ה. and *Rashi* to *Shmot* 12:15.

What emerges from all of the above is that the *Korban Pesach* is of monumental significance – it even generates its own holiday on the 14th of *Nissan* with an איסור מלאכה and an איסור חמץ. But why is it so important? What exactly are we supposed to be celebrating on the 14th of *Nissan*, and why couldn't it just be incorporated into *Chag HaMatzot*?

It seems that the reason the *Korban Pesach* is so significant is that it was only through the *Korban Pesach* that *Bnei Yisrael* merited being saved. The Jews in *Mitzrayim* do not seem to have been particularly meritorious *tzaddikim*. In fact, *Yechezkel* 20:5-8 relates that the Jews in Egypt refused to abandon their *avodah zarah*, so that God wanted to destroy them along with the Egyptians. However, as *Rashi* to *Shmot* 12:6 reveals, He gave them one last chance – the opportunity to perform two *mitzvot* and thereby merit redemption. Those two *mitzvot* were *dam milah* and *dam pesach* - the blood of circumcision and the blood of the *Korban Pesach*.

Brit milah's selection as one of the two *mitzvot* that would grant *Bnei Yisrael* the merit to be saved is readily understandable. Undergoing circumcision is how a Jew actively enters into the covenant with God, how he actively becomes a member of the Jewish nation. This is indicated by the very name of the *mitzvah* itself – *brit*, meaning covenant. It is also evident from the fact that *brit milah* is one of only two *mitzvot aseh* in the entire Torah whose failure to perform results in *karet*, excision. Since the point of a *brit milah* is to join the Jewish nation, the punishment for, or perhaps natural result of, not undergoing one is *karet* – being cut off. Thus, it makes perfect sense that this was one of the two *mitzvot* chosen to distinguish *Bnei Yisrael* from the Egyptians and enable them to be redeemed.

But why was *Korban Pesach* selected as the second *mitzvah*? Why not *Shabbat* or any other one of the myriad commandments? What about the *Korban Pesach* made it uniquely suited to give *Bnei Yisrael* the merit to be redeemed?

As mentioned earlier, there are only two *mitzvot aseh* in the entire Torah whose failure to perform results in *karet*. The first is *brit milah*, and the second is none other than *Korban Pesach*. The message seems to be that performing a *Korban Pesach*, like undergoing a *brit milah*, is a declaration that one is choosing to join himself to the Jewish nation.

However, this begs the question: how does bringing a *Korban Pesach* constitute a declaration of belonging to the Jewish nation?

It is well-established that sheep were an Egyptian deity.¹⁸ Therefore, *Bnei Yisrael* slaughtering sheep was an unequivocal demonstration that they utterly rejected all belief in the power of the Egyptian gods. After all, if they still harbored even a modicum of doubt, they never would have been able to take one of these “gods” and slaughter it. Not only did sacrificing the *Korban Pesach* demonstrate their repudiation of Egyptian gods, but it also showed their complete faith in *HaShem* as their protector and savior, because even if *Bnei Yisrael* no longer believed in the power of these sheep, the Egyptians still did. By slaughtering the sheep in front of the Egyptians as they were commanded, *Bnei Yisrael* proved that they had complete faith in *HaShem* to protect

¹⁸ See for example *Rashi* to *Bereishit* 46:34. This would also explain why it was an embarrassment that Yosef's brothers were shepherds.

them from the Egyptians' wrath. Thus, the *Korban Pesach* was the perfect vehicle for expressing rejection of *avodah zarah* as well as faith in the one true God.

In essence, Pesach was a time of national conversion, when each and every individual had to decide whether he or she believed in God and wanted to be part of His nation. It was not enough simply to have been born a descendant of the *Avot*, for as *Rashi* famously says on *Shmot* 13:18, only one fifth of the Jews were taken out of Egypt. Each and every Jew in Egypt had to actively choose, as all converts must, if he believed in the God of Israel; sacrificing the *Korban Pesach* was the vehicle for expressing this choice. In fact, *Chazal* felt the need to explicitly preclude the possibility that every convert throughout the ages would have to bring a *Korban Pesach* as part of his conversion process, regardless of what season of the year he converted.¹⁹

With this appreciation for the significance of the *Korban Pesach*, we can understand why it generates its own independent holiday. We usually think of Pesach as the holiday on which God chose us and redeemed us. But before God would choose us, we had to show that we were worthy by us first choosing Him. And that is why there are really two holidays in *Nissan*. First, on the 14th of *Nissan*, we commemorate the *Korban Pesach*, which was the medium through which *Bnei Yisrael* demonstrated their repudiation of all foreign beliefs and their willingness to risk their lives for their faith in *HaShem*. Only after recreating that experience are we ready to and worthy of celebrating the holiday of *Chag HaMatzot*, when God chooses us and redeems us.

But how do we nowadays recreate the *Korban Pesach* experience? The *seder* is all about reliving the part when God redeems us, but what do we do beforehand to become worthy of it? What is our *Korban Pesach*?

The answer is that we recreate the *Korban Pesach* experience by getting rid of *chametz*. It now makes perfect sense that *HaShem* imposed upon *chametz* the same strictures as on *avodah zarah* – not simply so that *chametz* represents *avodah zarah*, but so that getting rid of *chametz* reenacts that first initial bringing of the *Korban Pesach*, which actually was Egyptian *avodah zarah*. They had to sacrifice an animal which was viewed as *avodah zarah*; we relive that by getting rid of *chametz* which symbolizes *avodah zarah*. So destroying *chametz* does not simply represent destroying *avodah zarah*; it is how we today recreate the *Korban Pesach* experience and make ourselves worthy of being redeemed on Pesach.

This explains why *chametz* becomes *assur* on *Erev Pesach*, rather than with the onset of Pesach itself. The whole point is to get rid of *chametz* in advance so that we make ourselves worthy of being freed and of celebrating *Chag HaMatzot*. And the fact that the Torah prohibits *chametz* starting from noon, the first moment the *Korban Pesach* could be brought, is a clear indication that getting rid of *chametz* is our equivalent of bringing the *Korban Pesach*.

There is one final proof that eradicating *chametz* is our way of recreating the *Korban Pesach*. *Shmot* 12:13 tells us that it was specifically the placement of the *Korban Pesach*'s blood on their doorposts that gave *Bnei Yisrael* the merit to be saved from *Makkat Bechorot*. Why wasn't

¹⁹ *Mechilta* cited by *Rashi* to *Shmot* 12:48.

slaughtering the animal in front of the Egyptians sufficient? Why did they have to smear the blood on their doorposts, and why was that act the pinnacle of their *avodah*?

Rabbi Zvi Shimon²⁰ suggests the following insight: All animal sacrifices in the *Beit HaMikdash* required the sprinkling (or pouring) of the animal's blood on the *mizbe'ach*.²¹ Thus, *Bnei Yisrael*'s obligation to spread the blood of the *Korban Pesach* on their doorposts seems to parallel the general requirement to place a *korban*'s blood on the *mizbe'ach*. The implication is that by placing the *Korban Pesach*'s blood on their doorposts, *Bnei Yisrael* transformed their homes into mini-*mizbechot*, mini-altars. In fact, the *Mechilta* to *Shmot* 12:7 says explicitly, "We learn from here that they had three altars in Egypt: the lintel and the 2 doorposts."²²

We can now understand why we have to eliminate *chametz* from our homes, rather than simply refrain from eating it. What we are trying to do is recreate the *Korban Pesach*, and the climax of the *Korban Pesach* was the transformation of *Bnei Yisrael*'s homes into mini-*mizbechot*.

Therefore, in some way, we also must transform our homes into mini-*mizbechot*, and purging our homes from *chametz* does exactly that. As mentioned earlier, *chametz* is never allowed on the *mizbe'ach* at any point of the year, so us ridding our homes of *chametz* is a symbolic way of showing that we are transforming our homes into the *mizbe'ach*.

Thus, all of the questions with which we began have been answered. We must refrain from eating *chametz* in addition to eating *matzah* because the eradication of *chametz* possesses its own intrinsic significance - it is our way of reenacting the sacrificing of the *Korban Pesach*, thereby becoming worthy of being redeemed. We must go so far as to eliminate it from our homes because the climax of the *Korban Pesach* was *Bnei Yisrael* placing the blood of the *Korban Pesach* on their doorposts, thereby transforming their homes into *mizbechot*. Similarly, we symbolically transform our homes into altars by eradicating *chametz* from them. The *Korban Pesach* is what gave *Bnei Yisrael* the *z'chut* to be redeemed from *Mitzrayim*; hopefully our elimination of *chametz* from our homes will make us truly worthy of celebrating *Chag HaMatzot*, as well as the ultimate *ge'ulah*. בניסן נגאלו, בניסן עתידין ליגאל – In *Nissan* they were redeemed, in *Nissan* we are destined to be redeemed in the future.²³

²⁰ In his shiur, "Passover in Egypt – The Blood of Redemption" (www.vbm-torah.org/pesach/zs-blood.htm)

²¹ See for example *VaYikra* 1:5.

²² This also explains why *Korban Pesach* has a unique focus on the home – שה לבית אבות שה לבית.

²³ *Rosh HaShanah* 11a.

Yeshiva University's Center for the Jewish Future, in conjunction with the Bernard Revel Graduate School of Jewish Studies presents:

A Morning of Jewish Scholarship

with the Faculty of the Bernard Revel Graduate School

Sunday, April 25, 2010

Yeshiva University, Furst Hall • 500 West 185th St. New York, NY

Scholarship

Bridging Academic
Jewish Scholarship
and Torah Learning

9:30 am

Dr. David Berger *Ruth & I. Lewis Gordon Professor of Jewish History and Dean*
Halakhah, Hashkafah, and the Academic Study of Judaism

10:30 am

Dr. Debra Kaplan *Dr. Pinkhos Churgin Memorial Chair Assistant Professor of Jewish History*
Women, Marriage and Property: From the Rishonim to Early Modern Frankfurt

11:30 am

Dr. Ronnie Perelis *Chief Rabbi Dr. Isaac Abraham and Jelena (Rachel) Alcalay Assistant Professor of Sephardic Studies*
"These Indians are Jews": Lost Tribes, Secret Jews and Brave New Worlds

Dr. Mordechai Cohen *Professor of Bible and Associate Dean*
New Perspective on the Rambam: His Contribution to Parshanut ha-Miqra

Dr. Jonathan Dauber *Assistant Professor of Jewish Mysticism*
Controversies in Early Kabbalah: On the Writing of the First Kabbalistic Texts

For more information, please e-mail YUYomIyun@yu.edu.

The Arbesfeld Yom Rishon program presents

Women in Tanach and Talmud Yom Iyun • Sunday, May 2, 2010

Yeshiva University, Furst Hall • 500 West 185th St. New York, NY

9:15am
Registration

9:30am
Professor
Smadar

Rosensweig
The Interface of Pshat, Chazal, & Parshanut: The Model of Benot Zelaphchad

10:30am
Rabbi Hayyim Angel
Avigayil and David: The Role of That Narrative in Sefer Shemuel

Rabbi Shalom Carmy
Halakha and Rape: Three 20th Century Perspectives on One Rambam

Rabbi Daniel Feldman
Bound by Time? Women and Sefirat Ha'Omer

Mrs. Nechama Price
Strong or Weak? Women in Tanach

11:30am
Rabbi Mark Dratch
Love, Honor and Obey? Marital Relations and Relationships in the Talmud

Rabbi Shmuel Hain
Family Redeemed and Marriage Sanctified: An Overview of Seder Nashim

Dr. Aaron Koller
Rabbinic Readings of a Radical Book: Esther in Hazal

Mrs. Shoshana Schechter
Reflections on the Mirrors of Mitzrayim: Looking Forward to Make Change

12:30pm
Rabbi Yosef Blau
Halakhic Responses to the Changing Role of Women in Society

Rabbi Benjamin Blech
If Brit Milah is the Sign of our Covenant with G-d, What About Women?

Mrs. Yael Leibowitz
Polarity In Tanach: How David And Goliath Shed Light On Our Understanding Of Megillat Ruth

Rabbi Menachem Leibtag
The Women in Tanach Who Have No Name

\$10 Admission • Free Admission for YU Students • Mincha & conclusion at 1:30pm

A project of Yeshiva University's Center for the Jewish Future and the Office of Student Affairs. Co-sponsored by YSU, SOY and TAC. For dedication and sponsorship opportunities, or for more information, please visit www.kolleyomrison.org or e-mail YUYomIyun@yu.edu.

CREATING**CONNECTIONS**

A Nation Wide Event • May 7 - 9

a project of YUConnects

On May 7-9, 2010 dozens of communities across North America are participating in a remarkable **unifying event** - a weekend dedicated to **creating connections** with Orthodox **singles**.

Shuls and groups are collaborating by **hosting** Shabbatons, **inviting** community members to Shabbos meals, organizing **educational sessions and shiurim**, and many other activities.

This program is **not limited to Yeshiva University students** or alumni. Please

have your community join this initiative - go to **www.yu.edu/cjf/youconnects**

or call 212-960-5400 X 6163 to register and find out more!



Yeshiva University
CENTER FOR THE JEWISH FUTURE