

Introduction

Before Consuming Chametz [on Peasch] Recite with Proper Intent

“Heavenly Father, it is apparent to You that our will is to do Your will and to celebrate Passover by eating matzah and by refraining from chametz. But on this our hearts are distressed, because the oppression prevents us [from fulfilling these commandments] and we find our lives in danger. We are ready and willing to fulfill Your mandate that we ‘live by the commandments and not die by them.’ And we are observing Your warning: ‘Protect yourself and sustain your soul greatly.’ We therefore beseech You to keep us alive, sustain us and redeem us speedily, so that we may observe your statutes, carry out Your will and serve You wholeheartedly. Amen.”



This prayer was compiled by Rabbi Yissachar-Bernard Davids who, prior to World War II, served as Chief Rabbi in Rotterdam, Holland. During the war, he and his family were transferred to the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. On Pesach in Bergen-Belsen, Rabbi Davids instructed his fellow prisoners to eat *chametz* due to the Jewish principle of *pikuach nefesh*—the paramount rule that preserving life takes precedence above all other commandments. During the clandestine Pesach seder held at Bergen-Belsen, the rabbi recited the regular blessings for matza, but then added the above prayer for the specific situation.

I always wondered what God was doing during this seder at Bergen-Belsen. I imagine that *Hakadosh Baruch-Hu* was crying at the tragedy and simultaneously smiling at the holiness of this moment. Even in the most horrid of locations and in the most challenging of experiences, when everything was taken away from these Jews, this group of Pesach commemorators showed themselves to be truly free people, contributing a sense of eternity to the genetic makeup of our people.

In every generation we are, as a community and as individuals, confronted with pressures and experiences that enslave us. Some are extremely challenging—like those in Bergen-Belsen—and some are not filled with as much darkness, but are perplexing nonetheless. The Pesach agenda is to remove the *chametz*, the obstacles, the barriers, the stagnation that hinders our engagement with a purposeful lifestyle. *Bedikat chametz* is about recognizing that the darkness that clouds the crevices of our existence can be minimized or even fully dissipated. That process begins with the realization that a search is required and the leavening process that occurs in our lives can be reversed. Rabbi Davids showed us that no condition can forcibly deter us from celebrating the true Pesach experience—the opportunity to lead lives as free people.

May we all be blessed to engage in a Pesach experience that inspires us. I hope that this issue of *Torah To Go* helps to stimulate that personal journey.

Wishing you a *Chag Kasher V'Sameach*.

Kenneth Brander

*Vice President for University and Community Life
David Mitzner Dean, Center for the Jewish Future*