



DOES CHAMETZ REPRESENT OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH HASHEM?

Quintus Turnus Rufus the Evil, a senator and provincial governor under the Roman Empire, appears in several midrashim and Talmudic discourses, mostly in conversation with Rabbi Akiva.

In the Gemara in *Bava Batra* 10a, the following conversation appears:

וְזוֹ שְׂאֵלָה שֶׁאֵל טוּרְנוֹסְרוּפּוֹס הִרְשַׁע אֶת ר"ע
אִם אֱלֻקִּים אוֹהֵב עֲנִיִּים הוּא מִפְּנֵי מָה אֵינוּ
מִפְּרָנְסִים? אָמַר לוֹ כְּדֵי שְׁנִיצוֹל אָנוּ בְּהֵן מְדִינָה
שֶׁל גִּיהֶנֶם. אָמַר לוֹ [אֲדַרְבֵּהּ] זֶה שֶׁמַּחֲיִיבֶתֶן
לְגִיּהֶנֶם!

And this is the question that Turnus Rufus the wicked asked Rabbi Akiva: If your God loves the poor, for what reason

does He not support them Himself? Rabbi Akiva said to him: He commands us to sustain the poor, so that through them and the charity we give them we will be saved from the judgment of Gehenna. Turnus Rufus said to Rabbi Akiva: On the contrary, it is this charity which condemns you, the Jewish people, to Gehenna because you give it.

They both continue with different parables to illustrate their points.

Turnus Rufus here is accusing Rabbi Akiva of trying to be better than God. Hashem has created the world a certain way — with poor and downtrodden people. If we interfere, we are going against God's plans and

we are deserving of punishment. Rabbi Akiva counters and teaches us that we have a responsibility to make the world a better place. We are not forced to accept the world as it is; in fact we have a requirement to provide sustenance and support to those in need.

How do we do make the world a better place? By partnering with Hashem. Generally, Rabbi Akiva tells us this should be our approach. But is this true all the time? We can relate to Hashem and be a junior partner most of the time. However, to truly appreciate this partnership and our role, we need to step back and not partner with God but rather focus on

Him as our Master. When do we do this? During the holiday of Pesach — the holiday in which Hashem showed His mastery and as we left Egypt, we as a nation accepted G-d as our master.

With all the rites and rituals performed over the seven-day holiday, just how exactly do we demonstrate not just our recognition of G-d as our master, but our self-abnegation in deference to G-d? We are all familiar with our abstention from chametz and all things leaven, but is this commandment to have no leavened bread in our possession related to the concept of self-abnegation?

Chametz is an enigma. The rest of the year, not only is chametz permitted, there are several mitzvot associated with it. Yet for these seven days, it is forbidden. And we're not just forbidden from eating it, we can't own it or receive any benefit from it whatsoever. In fact, there are more prohibitions relating to chametz than for any other forbidden item in the Torah. The Torah (Shemot 12:15) says:

שבעת ימים מצות תאכלו... כי כל אוכל חמץ ונכרתה הנפש ההיא מישראל
For seven days we must eat matzah ... anyone who eats chametz will be cut off from the nation.

In Shemot ch. 13 (verse 7) we are told:

מצות יאכל את שבעת הימים ולא יראה לך חמץ ולא יראה לך שאר בכל גבולך.
Throughout the seven days unleavened bread shall be eaten; no leavened bread shall be found with you, and no leaven shall be found in all your territory.

In Shemot ch. 12 (verse 19) we are told:

שבעת ימים שאר לא ימצא בבתיכם כי כל

אכל מחמץ ונכרתה הנפש ההוא מעדת ישראל בגר ובאזרח הארץ.

No leaven shall be found in your houses for seven days. For whoever eats what is leavened, that person shall be cut off from the community of Israel, whether he is a stranger or a citizen of the country.

We remove all chametz from our homes and perform *bittul* chametz, giving up possession of any chametz in our homes and making it like the dust of the earth. If we retain possession of any chametz over Pesach, it remains forbidden for us and any other Jew forever.

All these prohibitions beg the question — why are we so strict with chametz? What is so unique about it that it has more *issurim* connected to it than any other item in the Torah? One common explanation connects chametz and the *yetzer harah*, the evil inclination. As the Zohar states, we need to remove the *yetzer harah* from our midst completely during Pesach. Yet this explanation is countered by the midrash (*Bereishit Rabbah* 9:7):

רבי נחמן בר שמואל בר נחמן בשם רב שמואל בר נחמן אמר: הנה טוב מאד, זה יצר טוב. והנה טוב מאד, זה יצר רע. וכי יצר הרע טוב מאד אתמהא?! אלא שאלולי יצר הרע, לא בנה אדם בית, ולא נשא אשה, ולא הוליד, ולא נשא ונתן. וכן שלמה אומר: (קהלת ד): כי היא קנאת איש מרעהו:

Rabbi Nahman said in Rabbi Samuel's name: "Behold, it was good" refers to the Good Desire; "And behold, it was very good" refers to the Evil Desire. Can then the Evil Desire be very good? That would be extraordinary! But without the Evil Desire, no man would build a house, take a wife and beget children; and thus said Solomon: "Again, I considered all labor and all excelling in work, that it is a man's rivalry with his neighbor." (Ecclesiastes 4:4)

So how could we be required to

remove it — wouldn't the world cease to function as usual? Another commonly taught idea is that the difference between chametz and matzah is yeast, with chametz representing ego and matzah representing humility. But this too is troublesome because all year we eat chametz and are commanded to use it to perform several mitzvot. If so, how can we associate chametz with something negative?

So the question remains: Why are we required to completely remove chametz from our lives, incurring serious consequences for owning even a small amount of it?

We must view chametz in a different light. Chametz represents our relationship and partnership with Hashem. All year we partner with Hashem, as Rabbi Akiva tells us. But during Pesach, this relationship changes.

This idea of partnership and chametz is evident from the Gemara in *Brachot* 38a, which discusses the nature of the bracha made on bread. There is a debate between the Rabbis and Rabbi Nechemya about this bracha:

שעל הפת הוא אומר "המוציא" וכו'. תנו רבנן: מיהו הוא אומר? — "המוציא להם מן הארץ". רבי נחמיה אומר: "מוציא להם מן הארץ". אמר רבא: ב"מוציא" כולי עלמא לא פליגי דאפיק משמע, דכתיב: "אל מוציאם ממצרים". כי פליגי ב"המוציא", רבנן סברי המוציא דאפיק משמע, דכתיב: "המוציא לך מים מצור החלמיש". ורבי נחמיה סבר המוציא דמפיק משמע, שנאמר: "המוציא אתכם מתחת סבלות מצרים".

We learned in the mishna that over bread one recites: Who brings forth bread from the earth. The Sages taught in a baraita: What does one who eats bread recite before eating? Who brings forth bread from the earth. Rabbi Nechemya says that the blessing is

phrased: *Who brought forth bread from the earth. Rava said: Everyone agrees that the term motzi means brought, in the past tense, as it is written: "God who brought them forth from Egypt is for them like the horns of the wild ox" (Numbers 23:22). When do they disagree? With regard to the term hamotzi, as the Rabbis hold that hamotzi means that God brought forth, in the past tense, as it is written: "Who brought forth for you water from a rock of flint" (Deuteronomy 8:15), which depicts a past event. Rabbi Nechemya holds that the term hamotzi means that God brings forth in the present tense, as it is stated in Moses' prophecy to the Jewish people in Egypt: "And you will know that I am the Lord your God who is bringing you forth from under the burdens of Egypt." (Exodus 6:7)*

What is the disagreement between Rabbi Nechemya and the Rabbis? On the surface, the question appears to be that when we make the bracha on bread, are we referring to a current event — God is bringing forth the bread from the earth — or are we referring to something that God has done in the past — that He brought forth the bread? Is this a continuous action or only one that refers to the past?

But if we look deeper there is another layer to this discussion. The language of the bracha states that Hashem brings bread from the earth. But we don't pick bread off trees, so is Hashem really bringing the bread forth from the earth? What comes from the earth? Wheat. But what turns it into bread? *Man* must add other ingredients: water and yeast, and perhaps sugar, salt, eggs and oil. With these ingredients, *man* then turns it into bread from which we gain sustenance. It is not God who is

creating the bread nor is He bringing the actual bread forth. It is rather a joint effort; a partnership where God brings the water and weather that enables the wheat to grow, while *man* takes the wheat and turns it into the actual finished product that is bread. If that is the case, then why does the bracha describe bread as from Hashem?

A hint to the answer may lie in the *Midrash Tanhuma*, Tazria 5, in another conversation between Turnus Rufus and Rabbi Akiva:

מעשה ששאל טורנוסרופוס הרשע את רבי עקיבא: איזו מעשים נאים, של הקדוש ברוך הוא או של בשר ודם? אמר לו: של בשר ודם נאים. . . . אמר לו: למה אתם מולין. אמר לו: אני הייתי יודע שעל דבר זה אתה שואלני, ולכך הקדמתי ואמרתי לך, שמעשה בני אדם נאים משל הקדוש ברוך הוא. הביא לו רבי עקיבא שבליים וגלסקאות. אמר לו: אלו מעשה הקדוש ברוך הוא, ואלו מעשה ידי אדם. אמר לו: אין אלו נאים יותר מן השבליים

It happened that Turnus Rufus the wicked asked R. Akiva, "Which works are the more beautiful? Those of the Holy One, blessed be He, or those of flesh and blood?" He said to him, "Those of flesh and blood are the more beautiful." ... He said to him, "Why do you circumcise?" He said to him, "I also knew that you were going to say this to me. I therefore anticipated [your question] when I said to you, 'A work of flesh and blood is more beautiful than one of the Holy One, blessed be He.' Bring me wheat spikes and white bread." He said to him, "The former is the work of the Holy One, blessed be He, and the latter is the work of flesh and blood. Is not the latter more beautiful?"

In the midrash, Turnus Rufus asks which is more beautiful — something that Hashem or man created? In his answer, Rabbi Akiva compares bread and wheat. The bread is more

beautiful — that which is created by people in partnership with God. Hashem puts forth wheat, which is an essential staple in life, but the most beautiful item in the world is created when we take this wheat, in partnership with God, and turn it into something that is the sustenance of life.

Perhaps then, the Gemara in *Brachot*, when discussing the bracha on bread, is alluding to this symbiotic relationship. We say "hamotzi"; God brings forth the wheat and then we take it and turn it into something beautiful — something more beautiful than even what God creates on this Earth. This is true whether we view the bracha as relating to the past or to the present — this is a relationship that began in the past — when we left Egypt and confirmed our belief as a nation in God, and continues to this day. Each time we make bread, we are beautifying God's world, we are partnering with Him to improve the world. And it is when we partner with Hashem that we make the most beautiful item that can provide sustenance to others — bread — a food whose bracha comes first in the order of brachot.

During the rest of the year, this partnership with Hashem is absolutely necessary. Man takes the wheat He gives us and produces bread. We partner with God, improving the world and making it a better place. Moreover, as Rabbi Akiva tells us, it is an expectation that Hashem placed upon us.

But what is the origin of this partnership? Yetziat Mitzrayim. What are we commemorating on Pesach? Yetziat Mitzrayim and the origins of our relationship with Hashem. At that point in time, we were not equal

partners — we did not have complete faith and could not take what Hashem gave us and make it perfect. At that point, we were like children and Hashem was like our father. We could not intervene in the world. Hashem had to intervene on our behalf and guide us every step of the way, showcasing His might and kindness throughout the process. He gave us protection when He punished the Egyptians. He saved us from not just the Egyptians but also from ourselves, showing love and devotion like a benevolent master.

Pesach is a time when we step back from being partners with Hashem and recognize the origins of our relationship with Him, reminding ourselves that our partnership with God only works if we recognize that He is the Master and Creator of the world. And how is that done? By removing all bread from our midst. Not only can we not eat it, we cannot make it nor own it nor do anything that might bring us close to making bread. We need to go back to our roots — our beginning — when we had just gained our freedom but couldn't truly partner with God. This is a time when we eat only matzah: wheat and water baked for a short period of time. Nothing beautiful, nothing fancy. Only simple food, nothing that provides sustenance in the way chametz does.

As Rav Melamed says in *Peninei Halacha*:

חג הפסח ובמיוחד ליל הסדר נועדו להשריש בנו את יסודות האמונה, שיש בורא לעולם והוא משגיח על ברואיו, ובחר בעם ישראל כדי שיגלה את שמו בעולם. ובכל עת שמתגלה יסוד אלוקי בעולם, הוא מופיע בדרך ניסית

לגמרי, כדי להודיע לנו שמדובר בעניין אלוקי ולא אנושי. לכן בפסח, החג שנועד להשריש יסודות האמונה, נצטוונו להיזהר מאוד מכל שמץ של חמץ במאכלינו וברשותנו, שהחמץ מבטא את הצד האנושי שלנו, ואסור לערבו בעת שאנו עוסקים ביסודות האמונה ושוורשיה. אבל במשך כל השנה, אנו עוסקים בענפים, ואותם אנחנו צריכים לפתח ולשכלל, ואז החמץ רצוי.

Pesach, and especially the Seder, is designed to instill in us the fundamentals of faith: that the world has a Creator,

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that He watches over His creatures, and that He chose the people of Israel to reveal His name in the world. Whenever there is revelation of an aspect of the divine in the world, it appears in a

completely miraculous fashion, to show that it is not a human endeavor. Therefore, on Pesach, the holiday geared toward imparting the fundamentals of faith, we are commanded to be extremely cautious to avoid eating and possessing even a smidgen of chametz, which symbolizes our human aspects that must not get mixed in when we speak about the roots and foundations of faith. During the rest of the year, however, when we are involved with developing and improving the branches, chametz is allowed and even desirable.

Bread, we see, is not something negative — in fact, it is desired and desirable to create bread the entire year. Bread signifies our incredible partnership with Hashem, which we recognize each time we make the bracha, *hamotzi lechem min haaretz*. But during Pesach, we are recognizing the origins of our faith, of our beginnings before we were partners with Hashem. We need to remove the bread from our midst, because at this point it is not the right way to connect to Hashem. Only when we recognize that it all comes from Hashem and that He is the creator of the world can we understand what our relationships need to be and what Hashem expects of us in the world. We can take our deep faith and understanding and use this knowledge and experience to further our relationship with Hashem during the year, engaging with the world and making His world, our world, the best it can be for all living souls.