



## WHEN THE STAKES ARE HIGH

**H**igh stakes can be stressful but they also present opportunities. Moments of great consequence reveal and create character as our truest selves often emerge from the cauldron of crisis. We have all lived through this in some measure during the past year. In the way we masked, practiced social distancing and maintained proper safety measures, our actions had the potential to either save lives or put other people at risk. Moreover, as a community identified by our faith, our collective decisions carried the possibility of either desecrating or sanctifying God's name. There was

much at stake this past year. And as such we were required to act deliberately and consciously each and every step of the way.

High stakes are at the center of the Pesach experience, as seen by the central mitzvot of chametz and matzah. The Torah instructs us:

לא תאכל עליו חמץ שבעת ימים תאכל עליו מצות.

*Do not eat chametz, but for seven days eat matzah.*

In one verse, the Torah teaches us about two mitzvot that are conceptually distinct but actually intrinsically connected. The Talmud,

for example, says that rice and millet cannot be used to bake matzot mitzvah, the matzah used to fulfill our obligation at the seder, because such cereal grains cannot leaven (*Pesachim* 35a). The lesson of this ruling is that if there is no potential to become chametz, the bread cannot be defined as matzah since matzah and chametz are two sides of the same process. Left unchecked, the mixture of flour and water naturally leavens to become chametz. Matzah, however, is when the process of becoming chametz is arrested. In fact, one could say that the distinguishing factor between matzah and chametz is *shimur*. Our intention



Find more shiurim and articles from Rabbi Dr. Ari Berman at <https://www.yutorah.org/Rabbi-Dr-Ari-Berman>

and careful vigilance to stop the natural flow of the leavening process is what sanctifies the dough being baked and prevents it from becoming prohibited.

This sense of matzah as emerging from a process deliberately fashioned with halakhic high stakes finds its most dramatic expression in the medieval custom to bake the matzot for the seder after the sixth hour on erev Pesach. Considering the fact that we are so careful in our preparations for Pesach to prevent any possibility of owning chametz, it is particularly striking there is a custom to bake matzah at the very time when chametz is actually prohibited. And even more striking is that the matzah produced under such circumstances is considered the most fit for the night of the seder. But this custom is better understood in light of the defining element of *shimur*. It is after the sixth hour when the stakes are highest that the significance of our actions is most highly felt.

The message of matzah is learning how to forge ourselves individually and communally specifically in moments when our attention and focus matter. Matzah must emerge from a world where the prospect of chametz is possible. Because without the possibility of chametz there is nothing at stake. Like matzah our personal and national character are forged specifically from moments when our actions make the most difference.

This past year has been an exercise in operating under similar circumstances. We have learned to pay close attention to activities we rarely thought much about. How close are we standing to one another? Did I bring a mask? Who have I been in contact with? For the entire world the stakes have been high. But if there is any lesson from the character of matzah it is that true character is specifically formed in such moments. It is when the stakes are high that heroes are born.

And over the past year, I have seen a lot of heroes in our community including our Roshei Yeshiva, faculty, staff, alumni and students. Our care and concern for the safety, well-being, and dignity of others have served as a stark reminder for the power and potential of our actions. When so much has been at stake we have risen together as a community and embraced the opportunity of the moment, realizing the gravity and power of our actions.

And it is my wish to all of you, as we hopefully are turning a new corner on this year-long battle, that we all remember the enduring character lesson from the character of matzah. Our actions matter. Each of us matter. And when the stakes are highest we have the potential to truly distinguish ourselves.

Wishing you a happy and healthy Pesach!



## MASTER'S DEGREE IN JEWISH EDUCATION

Where Teaching is Sacred  
Learning Transforms

Your Journey Starts at:  
[yu.edu/azrieli](http://yu.edu/azrieli)



**Azrieli**

Azrieli Graduate School of  
Jewish Education and Administration