

Pride & Passover

by Donne Hayden

"Rabbi Alexandri would end his daily prayers with the following supplication: 'Master of the Universe, You know full well that it is our desire to act according to Your will; but what prevents us from doing so? - the yeast in the dough...'" (Berakhot 17a)

Imagine with me that you and I are members of the same family, and we live in Egypt twelve thousand years ago. We are hungry. Often. We have gathered some grains from wild grasses which we munch on, but you have really bad teeth—you've broken some gnawing on things, or maybe you have cavities, so it hurts to chew. To make it easier for you, I grind up the grains into a powder; but this is not very satisfactory; so we mix water with the powder so you can scoop it up with your fingers or perhaps even drink it. Eventually we learn to cook the paste between on a flat rock near the fire, or maybe between two flat hot rocks, making a sort of pancake.

One day you're not feeling well, and though I've mixed up your grain paste, you can't eat anything. We don't waste anything; we have to conserve everything we have, so I don't throw it away, but wrap it up in a large leaf and leave it sitting for a day. The next morning, I go get it to offer to you again. Oddly enough, there is *more* than there was before—it's puffed up, doubled in size. There's **more**. How can that possibly be? But you're still hungry so I take it to you anyway. You ask, "What did you do to it?" and I answer, "Nothing. I swear. It was like that when I found it." Famished, you try, but still can't eat, so the mixture sits another day. The next morning, it is even bigger and puffier! It is overflowing the leaf, pushing the sides back, and draping over them. Not wanting to waste such bounty, I try cooking the puffed-up paste, and amazingly, the part I manage to cook tastes even better than our usual stuff! What *is* this magic? This is a gift from some god, surely. Something *amazing* happened here.

I've spoken about bread before and how much a miracle I consider it: the fact that we have bread, the fact that dough rises, the fact that yeast spores in the air mix with water and flour and make something else, something edible and delicious—I find this process miraculous. Today, however, we are far removed from the process. Some of you may make your own bread, but most of us go pick up a loaf from the store, so we have almost no connection with yeast, or bread as the product of a process.

Yeast, or more specifically, the *action of yeast*, came to mind as I was reading about Passover, which begins on Tuesday, (March 30). Central to this tradition is the eating of *unleavened bread* for seven days, that is, bread in which the action of yeast has been prevented as much as possible. Along with eating unleavened bread, Passover requires observant Jews to get rid of *chametz*, any grain product (like wheat, rye, oats, barley or hops) that has been fermented, i.e., changed through exposure to yeast spores and certain types of bacteria in the air. *Chametz* pertains to grain products, so it would include breads and beer. Wine is not included because though fermented, it comes from grapes, not grains.

According to a Jewish website on the subject, "The word translated "leaven" or "leavened bread" is the Hebrew word *chametz* (חָמֵץ). It does not actually mean "leaven" or "leavening" in the sense that we use the word today. . . . Jewish law defines *chametz* as any . . . grain product that has been combined with water and has been allowed to sit longer than eighteen minutes before being fully cooked. . . . *chametz* does not imply anything about the fluffiness or softness of the food, but only that it has been fermented."¹ (Dough may *begin* rising within 18 minutes, but it can take anywhere from several hours to several days to rise fully, depending on the environment.)

According to Rav Alex Israel, "In the Torah, two terms are used to designate leaven: 'se'or' and 'chametz.'" Se'or is a leavening agent, like yeast. It may be a piece of

¹ "Leaven' on Passover," *Biblical Kosher* website, <<http://biblicalkosher.alittlehebrew.com/books/biblical-kosher-eating/leaven-passover>>

old dough which has been allowed to reach a high level of fermentation. *Se'or* is quite inedible, but when a piece of it is kneaded into a mixture of flour and water, it accelerates the rising process and creates "*chametz*."² (Do any of you remember someone in your family using "everlasting yeast"?)

Some of you may be familiar with the Jewish custom of removing all the *chametz* from the house in the days before Passover, but for those who don't know, here is a brief review. Passover is a week-long commemoration of the Hebrews' escape from Egypt and slavery several thousand years ago. In Egypt, the Hebrews had learned to make leavened bread (apparently Egyptians were the first ancient people to figure out how to do that). But, as the story goes, the Hebrews had to leave Egypt in a hurry and there was no time to wait for dough to rise for bread. The Hebrews made and took with them *matzo*, "a type of flatbread made solely from flour and water which is continually worked from mixing through baking, so that it is not allowed to rise." Today, the process of making *matzo* –from combining the flour and water to working the dough to putting it in the oven—may take no longer than eighteen minutes in order to avoid yeast spores in the air beginning to act on the dough. *Matzo* is the original "fast food."

The tradition involving unleavened bread and getting rid of *chametz* comes from the Torah (Exodus 12:15) which says: "Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread. On the first day you shall remove leaven out of your houses, for if anyone eats what is leavened, from the first day until the seventh day, that person shall be cut off from Israel."

To conform to these instructions, in the days and weeks before Passover, observant Jews scour and scrub their homes to eliminate any trace of *chametz* as well as anything that has even *touched* something made from the leavening process. Cracks in the cabinets may be cleaned with toothbrushes to make sure not a crumb remains.

² Rav Alex Israel "The Symbolism of Chametz."

This is an example of people taking the Bible literally. But I don't for a minute believe that's all they are doing. The practice of eliminating *chametz* has a deeper meaning, one that I think I now understand.

I remember learning in my seminary classes that the Jews of Jesus' time considered yeast or leavening *impure* in some way. For instance, in Matthew 13:33, Jesus tells the disciples, "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened," and my professor pointed out that to compare the kingdom of heaven to yeast was radical and unexpected, since among the Jews, yeast was perceived as unclean or impure. (Of course, the main point in this comparison is that "a little of the kingdom of heaven goes a long way" just as it takes a little yeast to leaven a whole bunch of flour.) Still, the fact that yeast could be considered an impurity has always puzzled me. If something makes bread taste better, how is it "unclean"? What's that about?

Here is what I came to; I think yeast is a metaphor for pride and self-importance, for being "puffed up" and trying to appear larger or better or more significant than we really are. I gained this insight from a reference to yeast in a letter Paul wrote to the community of fledging Christian believers in Corinth on the southern tip of Greece. In his first letter to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 5:6-8), he scolds and advises them on how to behave. He tells them: "Your boasting is not a good thing"—Your bragging, your saying, "We're better; we've got the answer; we're the *real* Christians around here."

"Your boasting is not a good thing," Paul says. "Do you not know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough?" A little bit of leavening puffs up the whole batch of dough; a little bragging or boasting or being self-important colors the whole community and the way people perceive us. "Clean out the old yeast so that you may be a new batch, as you really are unleavened." This is written in several versions of the New Testament without a comma, but I prefer to read it "that you may be a new batch,

as you really are—unleavened.” In other words, be who you really are, be simple, be straightforward; don’t inflate your own importance; don’t puff yourself up; don’t be proud and lofty. Realize who and what you are.

This reminds me of the scene in Shakespeare’s play, *King Lear*, in which Lear meets Edgar who is disguised as Poor Tom, a naked beggar wandering the heath. Lear says:

Is man no more than this? Consider him well. Thou owest the worm no silk, the beast no hide, the sheep no wool, the cat no perfume. Ha! . . . Thou art the thing itself: unaccommodated [i.e., undressed] man is no more but such a poor bare, forked animal as thou art.

This is man, Lear says; stripped of all of our pretense, all our pride and achievements, without puffery, this is what we really are: a “poor bare forked animal.”

Unleavened bread, too, is “the thing itself.” Unleavened bread is made from flour and water; the mixture is not permitted to “rise,” not allowed to double or quadruple its size as happens when yeast is added; it is not permitted to become light and fluffy. It remains simply what it is: ground-up grain of some type and water. “Bread without leavening . . . represents truth in Jewish tradition, because bread that is unleavened retains the true flavor of the grain from which it is made.”³

The Passover practice of eliminating *chametz*—clearing out the “old batch” that included leavening, clearing out all the puffed-up-ness—I now understand this Jewish tradition calls people once a year to remember who they really are. To clear their lives of *chametz*, not just the literal crumbs of leavened bread but the stuff inside them; to rid themselves of self-importance or self-centeredness. They are called to recognize their origin as simple creatures of the earth, as they are, without puffery. “Remember who you are; you were slaves in Egypt. No matter how successful you are now, remember where you came from.”

³“Facts About Bread,” *Organic Wheat Products* website, <http://www.organicwheatproducts.com/?page_id=21>

So the yeast/leavening metaphor works well to represent human pride and self-satisfaction. I suggest that whenever we read it in the Old or New Testament, we try to think about it in the way the first hearers/readers would have understood it. They had a much closer relationship to yeast than most of us do. They saw it work every day; they saw what happened to dough. They saw what happens when you don't stop the yeast from rising. At a certain point, the dough becomes too puffed-up and thus unusable. Which happens to us too, if we get too puffed up with our own importance.

As for getting rid of *chametz*, it seems to me a good thing if, once a year, we are called to remember the unleavened self, to remember *who we really are*.