

The Leavened Loaves

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The central religious element of Shavuot during the era of the Beit Hamikdash was undoubtedly the “shteï halechem”- the two loaves. Indeed, the daily counting between Pesach and Shavuot is triggered by the Omer offering of barley brought on the second day of Pesach and culminates in the “minchah chadashah”- the new meal offering of two loaves from wheat (Vayikra 23:15-17), thus highlighting this offering’s prominent role.

According to the leading ashkenazic authority, the Rama (494:3), the shteï halechem is relevant today as it serves as the basis for the well known custom to eat dairy foods on Shavuot. The Rama makes an astonishing suggestion, not widely practiced, that the custom is not to simply consume dairy alone but rather to first have dairy followed by meat (with the requisite halachic buffers such as clearing the table and cleaning your mouth). Being that one meal is dairy and one is meat, each meal will require its own challah. This will result in having two (sets of) breads to symbolize the offering of two loaves, with our table signifying the altar (for other explanations of the custom to eat dairy, see the footnote in this pamphlet’s dedication as well as the Mishna Berura 494:12-13).

The Torah highlights the fact that these two loaves were baked leavened- “chametz te’afenah” (Vayikra 23:17). This detail is surprising for two reasons. Firstly, the Torah establishes the principle that flour offerings should not be leavened (Vayikra 2:11). While the two loaves were eaten by the Kohanim and not burned on the altar, it is still unusual to prescribe chametz in our service to Hashem (the Todah offering is another exception but even there, 30 of the 40 loaves are not chametz). Secondly, Chametz is absolutely forbidden on Pesach, and the Sages associate chametz with the yetzer hara (Brachot 17a), haughtiness or sluggishness (Sefer Hachinuch). Since Shavuot is considered the capstone of the seven week process, we would not have expected that which is so strictly forbidden on Pesach to suddenly play such a prominent role on Shavuot. If Chametz is prohibited on Pesach and banned on the altar all year round, why does the Torah make an exception for Shavuot?

To resolve this incongruence, let us revisit the notions of matzah and chametz. Matzah is achieved by ceasing the process of fermentation. The bread is not allowed to reach its full potential. If so, matzah symbolizes humility and limitation, the quintessential poor man’s bread. Chametz, however, represents human ingenuity and creativity in that it’s the completion of the process. Bread has a special status in Halacha and requires birchat hamazon, perhaps precisely because it is the result of human effort, energy and initiative. Chametz is one of the best examples of the capacity Hashem gives us to engage in the world and advance society.

With this understanding, we can suggest that when humankind stands before Hashem, we must recognize our limitations and acknowledge our dependence upon Hashem. Flour offerings

brought on the altar must be unleavened because when we approach Hashem, we realize that we are dwarfed by Him.

Turning to Pesach, we begin by reflecting upon the shackles of slavery which had plagued us. We had been limited and stifled from reaching our potential. Even when freed from Egypt, it was an incredible moment of progress, but before we engaged in human ingenuity, we needed to reflect upon how we will use our freedom? On Pesach, we recreate the experience, and so prior to jumping into creative ventures, prior to eating chametz, we must ask ourselves where we want our creativity to be placed? How will we be an agent for change? Each day of the Omer, we evaluate ourselves and discern in which ways we need to strengthen ourselves and grow.

Then we complete the seven weeks and reach Shavuot. We have now built up our character and developed a vision towards which we can apply our human creativity. Even more significant, Shavuot celebrates our receiving of the Torah, which serves as a guidebook to utilizing our creative talents in productive ways. Creativity unharnessed will often become the work of the yetzer hara, which is why the Sages associate chametz with negative qualities. With the Torah, however, we can now sublimate our instinctual impulses into performing impactful mitzvot. Our creativity can flourish within the framework of Torah. We are now in a position to incorporate chametz, representing creativity, into our service of Hashem which is exactly what we do with the shte'i halechem- the two loaves.

In the Shema, when we declare our aspiration to “love Hashem your God with all your heart,” the word “levavcha” is spelled unusually with a double *bet* when it could have been spelled with one *bet* as “libcha.” Rashi teaches us that the double *bet* hints to our desire to love Hashem with “shnei yitzrecha,” with both of our inclinations, the good and evil, the yetzer hatov and yetzer hara. Armed with commitment to Torah, we have the ability to offer the two loaves, and channel the chametz/human ingenuity for productive purposes that enable us to reach our potential and deepen our relationship with Hashem.

Turning to our current reality, we can perhaps draw a lesson from the Pesach- Shavuot trajectory to the pandemic which has dramatically affected our lives. While very different circumstances, we can suggest that like the Jewish people upon being freed from Egypt, needed to ready themselves for the transition and think about how they will maximize their freedom, we can engage in similar introspection. As restrictions are eased, society is opened up and we re-emerge into the world, we ought to reflect upon perspectives we’ve learned during this time and consider how we incorporate them going forward. It has been tough and major challenges lie ahead. With a newfound appreciation for that which is important to us, how will we be agents for change? How will we use our “freedom”? As we emerge from this tunnel, how will

we utilize our human creativity to (continue to) make a difference for our loved ones and for the world around us?

These are difficult questions for each of us to ponder but if we recall the message of the two loaves and grasp onto the Torah, our “tree of life” will point us in the right direction and supply us with the resilience, hope, confidence and framework to utilize our human ingenuity towards a better future.