

Shabbat HaGadol 5774 What is Fermenting Inside of Us?

We are fortunate that our home has a fairly expansive basement. It includes a finished main room, which is used mainly by our children to play ping-pong or x-box, create forts or work on an art project, play hockey and do puzzles. It has a guest room for friends and family to stay. It also has an unfinished section, where we do our laundry and keep our storage. Most of the storage bins are filled with hand-me-down clothes from older cousins, financial papers in case we are ever audited, and some old toys and baby equipment for when we have younger guests.

But there are two or three bins that are noted “Marc’s nostalgic treasures.” In these bins I keep a selection of some old favorite t-shirts that either no longer fit or are otherwise beyond use, notes and letters from long-ago friends, ticket-stubs from my concert attending days of the 80s and a few old newspapers from historical occasions. Most of the time those bins just sit there, untouched, and taking up space that is not otherwise needed. However, every once in a while, usually in response to a question from one of my children or some other reminder of the past, I will open those bins to look for something and then, forget about the rest of the day. I can get lost for hours looking through my old things and thinking about the events and the people that each one represents.

I was thinking about those bins when Abbey forwarded me an [article recently published on Tablet](#) – an online Jewish resource that markets itself as “A New Read on Jewish Life.” In the article, the author suggests that during Pesach, as we clean out our houses of bread and *chametz*, “we should do a bit of soul-searching to see if we can get rid of our metaphorical *chametz*—things we value and keep in the cabinets of our hearts but that we should really let go. It’s not easy to toss stuff that evokes special memories, whether it’s an object with sentimental value or just plain clutter.” The author suggests that we use the time of Passover not only to get free of bread, but to counter our hoarding tendencies and get rid of those things that no longer have meaning in our lives. It is one thing to hold on to items that have true meaning, but the problem, she writes, is when we “become unable to distinguish between the value of an old newspaper and a *siddur*.”

The [writer on Tablet](#) is not the only one advocating for a broader definition of *chametz* this year. On New York’s Upper West Side, the leaders of [Romemu](#), which describes itself as “a progressive, fully egalitarian community committed to *tikkun olam* and to service that flows from an identification with the sacredness of all life,” [sent an email to their membership last week](#) (and published on their website), saying that:

While thinking about ways that we could simplify our lives, in response to this message of Pesach, we realized that our lives, like yours, are weighed down by the constant pressure to respond, comment, file, delete and write email. How could we fully be in the holiday of liberation if we could not free ourselves from this particular heaviness that pervades all of our work-lives? And if we were

going to spend hours cleaning out our homes of *chametz*, how could we not clean our inner homes out of email *chametz* as well?

So, (drum roll please!) the Romemu staff is re-imagining the *chametz* of our work lives for this span of eight days.

From Monday evening, April 14th until sundown on Tuesday, April 22nd, Romemu will not send any community emails and the staff will not send or respond to any individual emails.

And since any *chametz* that is owned during Pesach should not be eaten after Pesach (this is known as *chametz she'avar alav ha'Pesach*), any emails that come in while we are out will not be read. Everyone will get an auto-response asking that the email be resent after Pesach....

De-email... and taste freedom.

So now, in addition to ridding ourselves of our breadcrumbs, it is suggested that we rid ourselves of excess objects and perhaps to clean out our e-mail boxes. As many of you are all too aware, emptying my e-mail inbox and turning it off for a week would be a very daunting task for me, far more likely to add to my own stress level as I prepare for the holiday!

But it turns out that this notion of an expansive understanding of *chametz* is not a so new and modern – it is found in many of our traditional sources as well, especially in our mystic tradition.

Rabbi Moshe Isserles (16th C. Poland), the Ashkenazi contributor to the Shulchan Arukh, required that the search for *chametz* must include checking the pockets of our clothes and coats. (Orech Chayim 433:11) Commenting on this passage, the Kabbalist Isaiah Horowitz – the SheLaH -- said that it is not only for crumbs that we must check our pockets – we must also use this time to check carefully to ensure that our pockets – i.e. our wallet - contain no funds deriving from theft, robbery or fraud. Thus, he interprets the cleaning out of *chametz* to include an ethical check of our business and personal financial practices.

In another interpretation of *chametz*, the commentator Kli Yakar teaches that we should understand that yeast, se'or, is associated with arrogance because the bread raised itself above the level of matza though it was only filled with pockets of hot air. He explains that arrogance is not simply something that a person can learn to control: The person must actively and deliberately go out of his way to destroy it, just like the *chametz* that we remove, nullify and then burn. The Kli Yakar (commenting on Leviticus 2:11) quotes the Talmud (*Brachot* 17a) comparing yeast as a catalyst that causes wheat to ferment, to the *yetzer hara* - the evil inclination – that is a catalyst that causes us to do evil. A small amount of yeast for the right amount of time causes a positive fermentation in bread and wine, but when it is not controlled, it also turns them sour. Similarly, when negative

feelings - even those that may initially be justified – are held for too long inside of us, it ferments and can take hold of our whole being.

For me, and probably for most of us here, this notion of a personal, emotional *chametz* is far more difficult to rid ourselves than the bread crumbs, our clutter and our e-mail – and perhaps far more important too.

The truth is, all of us maintain a certain level of *chametz* in our lives – those things which continue to simmer inside of us and turn us sour. Sometimes it is an old grudge against someone who once wronged us; sometimes it is a bitterness over not being invited to an event. Many of us, especially this time of year, find that when we are together with family it is difficult to move out of roles that were established long ago but no longer fit who we are. And I often encounter parents who maintain the *chametz* of a negative religious school experience, who unwittingly set up a self-fulfilling prophecy by telling their children that they will go to Hebrew school and hate it in the same way that the parent did.

Each of these examples can be like *chametz*, in which our negative feelings ferment inside of us and prevent us from moving forward in our lives. Ridding ourselves of this type of *chametz*, however, can make the difficult work of cleaning of our kitchens seem simple in comparison.

But I would suggest that there are steps that we can take that will help us identify these negative feelings and how to rid ourselves of them. As many of you know, our member Kelly Galfand is a personal organizer by profession, and in March her company, Joy in Your Space, sent out an “Elite 8” questions to ask yourself when you are working to de-clutter your house. The questions are meant as a guide to help people decide what items to keep and what items to toss.

I think this notion of having a set of clarifying questions can be helpful in this context as well. Since the NCAA tournament is over and Passover is about to begin, I will limit myself to four questions instead of her eight. When thinking about the emotions that are fermenting inside of us, I suggest we ask:

- 1) Who gets hurt when I hold onto the *chametz* of negative feelings towards others, even if there was a good reason that I was upset?
- 2) Do the benefits I get from feeling vindicated or vengeance improve me as a person or just make me feel better – puffing me up like yeast?
- 3) In what ways do my negative feelings prevent me from being the person I want to be and hamper my relationships with others?
- 4) In consideration of the questions above, what emotional *chametz* am I holding on to that I am ready to get rid of this year?

As we all know, asking ourselves these questions will not instantly cleanse us of our emotional or spritual *chametz* in the way that a fire will instantly burn the actual *chametz*. But it is a start. And we know that if we don't actively work to rid ourselves of this *chametz*, it will continue to ferment inside of us and can turn us sour. And, as an added bonus, if we start this process now, we will already be ahead of schedule when it comes time for Elul and our preparations for the High Holidays. The Haftarah for Shabbat HaGadol hints at this connection with the Yom Kippur – with God telling us *shuvu elai v'ashuvah aleichem* “Turn (or repent) to me and I will turn to (forgive) you.” (Malachi 3:7)

And perhaps, there is one more side benefit – if we spend some of our time now focusing on our emotional *chametz*, it will make the work of our final cleaning out of our physical *chametz* over the next two days appear a little less daunting.

I hope that each of you and your families will have a wonderful Pesach, in which you can celebrate not only our people's freedom, but the freedom of *chametz* of your life, in whatever form it may take.

Shabbat shalom.