

Passover

Chametz: Out of Sight Out of Mind

By Batsheva Pomerantz

(Israel Press Service) — In Israel, the pithy saying “Dust is not chametz (leaven) and children are not the korban (Paschal sacrifice)” reminds homemakers to take pre-Pesach cleaning in their stride and have patience with their children when they unintentionally leave a trail of chametz.

According to biblical law, the prohibition of chametz applies to the fermented products of five kinds of grain: wheat, barley, oats, rye and spelt, which are not to be found in the house during the festival.

Israeli rabbis publish detailed annual guides regarding Pesach cleaning, all of which state that thorough cleaning should take place only in rooms where chametz is located, including bedrooms if people nosh there, the living room, dining room and balcony. Work stations and cars are also checked and cleaned or vacuumed and clothing to be worn on Passover should be shaken and brushed to remove specks and crumbs.

The general obligation to dispose of crumbs, however, does not apply if the crumbs are less than the size of an olive and are dirty enough to prevent a person from eating them.

The cleaning and koshering (ritual scouring) of the kitchen is a most intensive task, requiring flexibility and elbow-grease for the scrubbing of countertops, sinks, tables, chairs and kitchen appliances. It should be noted, however, that it is sufficient to wipe an oven with a rag soaked in detergent or clean it with a regular oven-cleaner, then turn the oven to its maximum temperature for at least one hour in order for it to be Kosher for Passover. A microwave simply needs washing down 24 hours after the microwave last contained chametz, and a bowl or cup of boiling water placed inside for about ten minutes. The glass tray should be immersed in boiling water.

If chametz particles cling to pots used throughout the year, they can be soaked in bleach or detergent to render any crumbs inedible and therefore not considered chametz. This does not, however, make the vessel Kosher for Passover so it must then be stored away. In Israel many people take metal pots and utensils to a central koshering location where they are put into wire baskets and immersed in boiling water.

Where possible, it is best to have separate sets of dishes, cutlery and pots for Passover, yet it is possible to make some of these fit for Passover use by this same koshering process. A rabbi should be consulted for specifics.

Businesses which have warehouses stocked with chametz stand to lose a substantial income over Pesach. The institution by Israeli rabbis of the legal sale of chametz to a non-Jew for the week of Passover, allows businesses, both large and small, to survive over Pesach. The stipulation that



Burning chametz in Jerusalem's ultra-Orthodox Mea Shearim neighborhood on the eve of Passover.

IPS photo by Mark Neyman, courtesy GPO.

the Jew repurchase the chametz for a nominal fee after Pesach protects his right to reclaim his produce.

The sale of chametz for food companies is sound business sense. “We sell our chametz through a rabbi from the Rabbinate, who is also the plant’s mashgiach (kashrut supervisor),” says Eli Rapoport, director-general of Mevushalet, a plant that produces and distributes 18,000 meals a day to kindergartens, schools, colleges, old-age homes, etc. around the country. “We have chametz ingredients in our storehouses that must be sold in order

to be used after the holiday. Our religious clients inquire about this after Passover.”

The procedure of selling the chametz takes place a few days before Passover, and goes into affect before noon on the 14th of Nissan, the day before Passover. Throughout Israel the sale usually takes place in the synagogue with the local rabbi acting as a shaliach (messenger) for the homeowner. The rabbi then passes on the sale document to the Chief Rabbinate and the entire chametz of the State of Israel is sold to one non-Jewish person.

This year, for the eleventh year

in a row, Jaber Hussein, an Israeli-Arab from Abu Ghosh near Jerusalem, will buy the chametz of the State of Israel in a business transaction conducted in the offices of the Chief Rabbis. As Food and Beverage Department manager at the Jerusalem Ramada Renaissance hotel, Hussein was originally approached by former Chief Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau regarding buying the country’s chametz. “I understand the importance of this transaction. It helps the Jews and is an example of cooperation and coexistence between us,” says Hussein, 42, a father of four.

Most grocery stores and supermarkets in Israel carry a certificate attesting to their selling the chametz during Passover as after the festival, observant Jews will only buy in places that have such certification. For the ultra-Orthodox, however, the mass sale of chametz is not sufficient, and they wait until processed foods appear on the shelves that were prepared after Passover. In some stores one can buy packages of flour with a stamp, “ground after Passover 5766 (Jewish year)” or breakfast cereals, cookies and pasta stamped, “Prepared after Passover.”

During the holiday, Israeli supermarket shelves are lined with paper on which Kosher for Passover food is placed. Sometimes shelves with chametz packages are covered with broad sheets of paper, so they’re out of sight. The customer knows by the certificate that the supermarket

does not own the food and that it was sold before the holiday.

Some small eateries, like falafel or pizza stands, close down during Passover, since it’s not profitable for them to make the complex changeover. Others take advantage of the break to be on vacation with their family.

Finally, with the house free of crumbs, the essential bedikat chametz search, which takes place after dark on the 14th of Nissan, takes place. This search is on to make sure that all parts of the house are indeed clean and that no remnants of chametz remain. Candlelight is used to provide focused light for the search in the darkened house. Ten small pieces of bread are placed throughout the house and family members make a thorough search for chametz. The ten pieces of bread are swept with a feather or wooden spoon onto a piece of newspaper and then into a small bag. The head of the household then recites a blessing and an annulment of all chametz that was found in the bedikat chametz. Carefully wrapped, the package is placed on the side, separate from Passover dishes and food. The following morning these last vestiges of chametz are burned outdoors in a small fire with a final annulment of chametz that is in the homeowner’s possession, which he may not have seen or be aware of.

With chametz now out of sight and out of mind, the focus switches to preparations for the Passover Seder in anticipation of having an enjoyable and meaningful Seder with family and friends. ✪

Searching for God at Passover

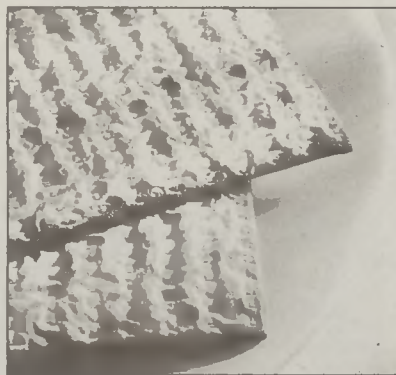
By Jeremy Deutchman

For a nation widely credited as nurturing the most religious society in history, I am often struck by our collective discomfort in envisioning — and believing in — God. It is as though we hold two competing truths to be self-evident, and mutually exclusive: We put faith in our religious tradition while holding ourselves at arm’s length from it. Our role as educated, rational thinkers allows us to pray, but demands that we do it with a nudge and a wink, lest our neighbors think we have been taken in by snake oils or charlatans.

If our enlightenment makes us skeptics, it also enables us to channel our religious fervor into tangible good works. As a friend of mine puts it, “Too many people need food and shelter. Why spend time asking God to do something that we can do ourselves?” And Judaism commands — even commands — right action, suggesting in a generations-old emphasis on *tikkun olam* that we, not God, are responsible for building the fabric of a healthy community.

And yet, it has always seemed to me that acts of social justice are themselves evidence of God’s

hand in the world. What else explains millions of people in every nation on Earth volunteering precious resources (whether time, money or the sweat of their physical labor) to alleviate suffering and improve the lives of people they will never know? What could be more divinely inspired than strangers holding hands, spanning oceans and spinning webs of compassion and commitment that recognize our common humanity?



This question of God’s presence is particularly important for Jews as we approach the Passover season. That the ancient Israelites in Egypt suffered at the hands of a brutal oppressor is not in doubt. Nor is their eventual liberation

from tyranny. But the critical question, the one that bears directly on the issue at hand, is the link between agency and outcome. Were the Israelites freed because God led them out of Egypt with a mighty hand, or because, in a forceful rejection of indentured servitude, they motivated themselves to get up and go? What are the implications of a God who simultaneously creates moral imperatives and places them on indefinite hold? Every Passover, we relive the Exodus as though we ourselves are experiencing it first hand. And so these questions, far from being abstract or irrelevant, spill urgently from our Jewish hearts and minds.

Of course no amount of column inches will ever adequately resolve this dilemma. But the more I expose myself to the challenges it presents, the more convinced I become that the answer is all around me. Though I lack language and understanding, still I can see the exquisite beauty of an interdependent relationship in which Man asks God and God asks Man and it is hard to know where one question stops and the other begins. Our actions make God manifest at the same time that God makes our actions possible.

For me, it is this sense of possibility, of our function as created and creator, that makes this season

so resonant with meaning. The Exodus calls to us each in our own way, charging us with responsibility and filling us with promise. Will God show us the way home? Will we find our own drive to get there? Does God bear the burden of spreading justice in the world? Are our efforts capable of lightening the load? The answer can only be “yes.”

Learning to accept uncertainty is both an uncomfortable proposition and one of life’s most enduring lessons. But our faith acts as a bridge, allowing us to reconcile what is with what might be. We will never know what God intends or whether our decisions might be divinely guided. Where does that leave us? It is a difficult question, and in the meantime, as my friend points out, “Too many people need food and shelter.” But, caught somewhere between science and faith, I am not ready to accept his suggestion that we leave God out of the picture. Because I can’t be sure, but it remains my profound hope that, in taking responsibility for our own actions, we will come to find that we are not alone, that we are engaged in a holy partnership with a powerful spirit and that believing in ourselves is a crucial first step to experiencing the divine. ✪

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